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Chapter

Using Indigenous Approaches as a Bridge between Policies, Interventions, and the Grassroots

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Abstract

Indigenous approaches are crucial for indigenous people across the world including Africans, in assessing the impact of imperialism and its manifestations in colonialism, liberalism, globalization, and Western research. Such approaches acknowledge the fundamental importance of local culture, recognizing that geographical, empirically based knowledge provides culturally appropriate solutions to problems. Indigenous approaches serve as a bridge between policies, interventions, and the grassroots. Social work, as a practice-based profession and an academic discipline, should acknowledge and include indigenous knowledge and methodologies in its curriculum. It is important to empower and provide space and a voice for the grassroots to articulate problems and participate in solving them by sharing their own wisdom and experiences. It is shortsighted and unworkable to rely upon prescribed Western policies and curriculums with the assumption that they will seamlessly transfer to other, fundamentally different, people and cultures. Failing to discard such an "apples to apples approach" will only result in a prolonged failure to adequately address the socioeconomic problems in Sub-Saharan Africa and will only perpetuate the problems associated with imperialism and [neo]colonialism. This chapter provides conceptual definitions to constructs such as decolonization and indigenous knowledge and demonstrates the importance of decolonization and indigenous approaches in social work scholarship and practice as it relates to Africa.

Keywords: decolonization, development, grassroots, indigenous approaches, policies

1. Introduction

The current state of African society and the practice of social work in Africa must be viewed through a historical lens. As Said [1] said "Past and present inform each other, each implies the other and each co-exists with the other. Neither past nor present has a complete meaning alone. How we formulate or represent the past shapes our understanding and views of the present (p. 4)". Colonial administrators and missionaries introduced social work in South Africa in the 1920s to address white poverty, particularly [white] orphans and juveniles [2–5].

To better understand the current structural issues, development policies, and programs in Africa, we need to know the history of colonialism and its vivid manifestations to date. Before colonialism, African societies were ethnic nationalities. Land ownership formed society's economic base while a kinship system guided the governance and social support system [6]. The social support system was collectivist

and centered around mutuality and accepted reciprocity. Collectivism as a cultural pattern emphasized the extended family, community, caste, tribes, and country [7]. There were no private-public dichotomies or hierarchies, gender roles were interdependent (equally valuable and flexible), and decisions were made with utmost concern for common goals in the spirit of cooperation and collaboration [6, 7].

Colonialism, through its introduction of capitalist principles, destroyed these existing structures and social support systems [6]. Specifically, the competition, increased capital, and free market economy placed African culture's inherent principles of cooperation and reciprocity on the back burner. The elevation of monetary considerations as the medium for exchanges of goods and services widened the distinction between the homestead and the workplace and reduced the importance of mutual reciprocity as the basis of welfare [6]. Thus, it disconnected people from their histories, landscapes, language, social relations, and their own ways of thinking, feeling, and interacting with the world [2, 8, 9].

In the current period of post-colonialism and globalization, which brought magnificent changes in the socioeconomic, educational, and political environment of the content, "Africans" cannot simply reclaim their traditional governance [10]. "African" leadership now works within the globalized socioeconomic and political framework, pioneered by undeniably powerful Western financial institutions. As leaders of the world economy, international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) have significant influence in shaping policies all over the world, particularly in the "developing" countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. The IMF, WB, and other donors have required countries to adopt Poverty Reduction Strategies, Growth and Transformation Plans, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to access loans and grants [11]. Faced with little other choice, many of these Western-developed aims are now inherent in national policy documents governing African countries.

2. Methodology

This conceptual chapter analyzes literature regarding international development policies, [de]colonization, indigenous knowledge and methodology, and social work in Africa. From this analysis, it was evident that social work in Africa must challenge dominant models of research and practice while integrating traditional values and practices that have withstood centuries of oppression into culturally consonant forms of service and inquiry. Hence, decolonization is necessary.

3. Trends and impacts of international policies: a brief historical account

The 1960s was a decade of important historical developments and trends in the UN agenda as many countries received their independence from colonial governance. The UN's admission of these17 new countries brought to the forefront the issue of societal development as the "UN Development Decade" called for accelerated measures to eliminate illiteracy, hunger, and disease [12, 13]. Later, the UN's third New Development Strategy of the 1980s set poverty reduction goals, objectives, and targets to be reached by 1990. During this decade, the influence of the IMF and World Bank increased as they imposed Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) on the increasing number of poor countries seeking loans. These SAPS are designed to increase the flow of money to a country through promotion of exports and increased taxes while cutting social spending on education and health care, privatizing public sector enterprises, and imposing financial liberalization policies designed to remove restrictions on the flow of international capital in and out of the country.

The SAPs, however, ultimately failed to generate the intended economic growth for participating developing countries [12–14] because their conception of growth and economic wellbeing were primarily shaped by Western corporate values and failed to account for cultural contexts [15].

In the 1990s, following the failure of the SAPs, the UN's focus shifted to institutional development, including good governance, transparency, accountability, decentralization, and social security. In the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), participants agreed to adopt rights-based approaches to promote sexual and reproductive health, achieve universal education, promote gender equality and empower women, reduce child mortality, and improve maternal health.

These decisions formed the foundation of the well-known Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set forth in the 2000 Millennium Declaration. The MDGs tried to take a holistic approach to development, combining the economic policies of the 1980s to address poverty and economic development with the 1990s rights-based approach to social issues [12, 13, 16]. The MDGs were tremendously popular as 189 countries across world endorsed them. Such a large constituency ensured the legitimacy of the MDGs and ensured consensus among development actors, including among policy makers (at the national and international level), multilateral and bilateral institutions, and other stakeholders. Saith [17] argued that the MDGs reinforced solidarity and purpose, galvanized the international community, and improved the targeting and flow of aid. The MDGs also instrumentalized the development objectives by providing templates of targets and indicators, which enhanced the monitoring and evaluation of projects [17]. Focusing on development and the meeting of specific "goals," the MDGs blazed a narrow and technocratic path to define the complex and ambiguous concept of "development" [16].

Some have argued that classical economic reasoning formed the basis for the MDGs and that they are intertwined with the "grand neo-liberal strategic agenda" [17, 18]. The MDG project places great emphasis on financial resource mobilization and technical solutions, but far less on transforming power relations that are partly responsible for current levels of poverty in developing, and developed, countries [17]; UN, 2008, HR/PUB/08/3. Saith [17] stresses that "... the entire MDG scaffolding and accompanying text is insufficiently [17] global in its approach. It tends to ghettoize the problem of development and locates it firmly in the third world—as if development is fundamentally and exclusively an issue of absolute levels of living" (p. 1184). Easterly [14] argues that MDGs are poorly and arbitrarily designed to measure progress against poverty and deprivation, and that their design makes Africa look worse than it really is.

Despite the critics of the MDGs, the UN followed a similar trend to approve another global agenda—Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Similar to the MDGs that promised to address extreme poverty in a comprehensive manner and with a focused framework [19], SDGs aim to end world poverty by 2030, fight inequality and protect the environment. Also wildly popular, the SDGs were unanimously endorsed by 193 member states as a successor to the MDGs. And similarly technocratic, the SDGs have 17 overarching goals with 169 targets (September 25, 2015).

As an example, Ethiopia, my country of origin, endorsed and aligned its national policies with international policies, including the MDGs and the SDGs. For instance, the 5 year Growth and Transformation Plan I (GTP I-2010/11-2014/15) aligned its specific objectives and indicators with the MDGs. During that time, Ethiopia showed progress but did not fully meet the outlined objectives. After endorsing the SDGs, UNDP reports indicate that Ethiopia is mainstreaming the SDGs into national priorities and strategies (July 30, 2015). Confirming the progress of Ethiopia in mainstreaming SDGs, UNDP (April 26, 2016) revealed that

"The National Planning Commission is undertaking an exercise to build on Ethiopia's current five-year development plan to develop a 15-year perspective plan (2016–2030) to allow the country fully alignment with SDGs." UNDP has also pledged to support the undergoing formulation process. In addition, numerous national and international organizations started to collaborate with the UN and UN member nations to achieve these goals.

Examining the socioeconomic and political dimensions in the development, ratification, and adaptation of international development policies, there is a huge power imbalance between the "developed" Western and Northern nations that provide loans and grants, and the "impoverished" Southern nations that need loans and grants to provide health, education, and development programs. Western nations' financial power bestowed on them the power to develop and enforce policies as a requirement to access loans and grants. In this structural reality, countries ratifying and/or adopting these policies, particularly grassroots, have minimal or no say in the development of policies that directly or indirectly influence their day-to-day livelihood. Understanding this context is the basis for understanding systemic oppressions, and why barriers exist to the implementation of policies and programs.

The power dynamics are a major challenge for "developing" countries like Ethiopia and ultimately provide them with little to no choice. As an impoverished country targeted for nearly all international programs, Ethiopia requires large grants to fight what amounts in some cases to life-threatening conditions. The cost of those grants, however, is the forced acceptance and implementation of often ineffective Western values contrary to the very foundation of the society.

Policy makers and donors would be wise to take a culturally competent approach when determining how best to address core issues like extreme poverty, access to universal education, maternal, and infant mortality. To have relevant and sustainable socioeconomic policies in Africa, the starting point must be the community—the targets [2]. This requires decolonizing the process of policy formulation and intervention program planning [8, 9, 20]. A responsible and self-determinative process requires allowing target communities to design, implement, and evaluate programs that enhance their wellbeing within the framework of their own society rather than a dogmatic Western framework tailored to somehow globally "fit" any given nation or community irrespective of individual circumstance.

Social work, as a "a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people [21]" must play a significant role in the process of decolonization, through acknowledging and using indigenous approaches in practice and academia, as well as facilitating discussions among various stakeholders. This process begins at the educational level. Academic must decolonize and revise their curriculums to promote indigenous knowledge and include introducing and deconstructing macro-level concepts such as international and national policies.

4. Indigenous knowledge-the principal tool for decolonization

While institutions like the World Bank have acknowledged that knowledge is the key to sustainable social and economic development, they continue to disregard the importance of the source from which that knowledge flows. Building on local knowledge, rather than globalized western principles, is the first step to mobilize capital [22]. Indeed, development policies, in the past several decades, have been consistently criticized for expert-led, top-down approaches, which fail to address structural problems that are specific to individual African nations [23–25]. National policies, therefore, must reflect on structural issues giving due attention to the

sociocultural and economic realities of citizens in the individualized circumstances in which they exist rather than the demonstrably flawed "one size fits all" approach of the past 50 years as Tewodros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of World Health Organization, who also served as the Minister of Foreigner Affairs, and Minister of Health for Ethiopia argued, "country ownership is the surest way for developing counties to chart their own courses of development and overcome the challenges they face in building effective and productive state" (p. 1127). It is vital to challenge tailor made, neoliberal and neocolonial policies and programs to exercise true self-determination and live in a just world. "*The Master's tools will never dismantle the master's house* [26]." True self-determination begins with using indigenous knowledge to design indigenous policies, programs, and school curriculums. Indigenous knowledge provides culturally appropriate solutions for particular contexts [2, 6, 27].

The heterogeneous nature of the indigenous approach necessitates careful attention to particularized circumstances. Indigenous practicum accounts for differences in gender, age, class, caste, occupational, and other lines and even between individuals of similar social status [25]. Indigenous knowledge comes from a range of sources embedded in current and past community practices, institutions, relationships, and rituals; it is ever-evolving and usually tacit [22, 25, 28, 29]. Getty [29] affirms that indigenous knowledge arises from both observation and interaction with the biological and social environments and spiritual insights. Indigenous knowledge is passed between generations using idioms tales, symbols, myths, and rites [9, 25, 27, 30, 31].

Moreover, a fundamental tenant of indigenous worldview is collectivism, and a belief that all life, living, and non-living is sacred, related, and reciprocal [9, 10, 28, 29]. Thus, there existence is a strong sense of unity with the environment and a lack of hierarchical structures [28].

All of the aforementioned principles regarding = indigenous knowledge challenges the "internationalization" and "standardization" of theories, concepts, and methodologies so pervasive in recent international policy and counsel in favor of decolonization [6, 27]. Gray and Coates [27] argue that indigenous approaches can "be understood as a process of decentering colonial discourse and power structures through tactics that can be resistant (p. 623)." Indeed, such approaches require moving away from adopting or contextualizing Western theories and practice approaches, instead going back to one's roots to seek knowledge and direction [2, 8, 27].

Seeking knowledge and direction from the grassroots, the elders, the ritual leaders, the spirits, and the cosmos may well reverse the hierarchical power structure that dictate policies using "expert" based, top-down approaches policy makers at every level of the hierarchy, must recognize their privilege, validate indigenous wisdom, and discard their power as professionals and scholars [32].

5. Indigenous methodologies

Policies are generally dictated by research using particularized methodologies. "Methodology legitimizes and delegitimizes, validates and invalidates, approves and disapproves, passes and fails, claims to knowledge and knowledge production" [33]. Methodology frames the question being asked, determines the set of instruments and methods to be employed, and shapes the analysis [33–35].

For Tuhiwai Smith [9] research is one of the ways in which the underlying code of imperialism is regulated and realized. It is regulated through the formal rules of individual scholarly disciplines and scientific paradigms and the institutions that support them. Research is realized in the myriad of representations and ideological constructions of the "Other" in scholarly and "popular" works, and in

the principles that help to select official histories and school curricula [9, 29, 33]. Critically, "Western" methodologies only acknowledge things that are perceivable by the five human senses—taste, touch, sight, smell, and audition—as legitimate evidence of knowledge. The rest—such as gods or spirits—is dismissed as fictitious [9, 25, 33]. However, in non-western societies, including "Africans," spirituality and esthetics structure the multitude's life [33]. Given this context, indigenous research is not socially or politically neutral, yet, it should not be taken as pre- or anti-science [25, 33].

Writing about indigenous research methods and methodologies, Cardinal (2001, cited in [29], p. 182) noted, "Indigenous cultures are rich with ways of gathering, discovering, and uncovering the knowledge." Indigenous research challenges the so-called objective, value-free, and scientific process for observing and analyzing human reality due to the emphasis placed on deterministic models of analysis and its denial of culture as a mediating force [9, 20, 36]. Indigenous research is always grounded in principles centered on autonomy, home, family, and kinship as it presupposes a shared collective community vision [34].

Policy researchers in "Africa" should require indigenous research protocols. Indigenous research protocols require building relationships and collaborations between the researcher and research participants so as to forge trust, equity, and partnership in the whole process [37]. This research paradigm is appropriate to the needs of indigenous communities in their struggle for self-determination as it can emancipate sustainable social change [37]. Moreover, it is empowering for people to be recognized as experts in their own sociocultural and economic contexts and to articulate their own problems and contribute their opinions in solving these problems.

To effectively employ indigenous methodologies, researchers must challenge their traditional notions of objective control between researchers and research participants [35]. Researchers need to be self-aware and reflective of their biases and stereotypes. They also need to gauge their relationship with research participants and the community as a whole to ensure that they have respected self-determination and accurately captured voices.

Education policies, to be relevant, must consider the sociocultural realities of a given community. By using indigenous approaches, it is possible to develop local, empirically based knowledge [9, 20, 27, 30]. Use of indigenous approaches would also assist in decolonizing the processes of research, curriculum development, and program planning [30, 31, 33, 35], changing the "top-down," with "bottom-up" approach.

For example in Ethiopia, the development of social work education has two predominant time periods—from 1959 to 1974 and the post 2004 "re-birth" of social work [38]. 1974 marked the rise of the Socialist Regime in Ethiopia that associated social work with the profession of the bourgeois; hence, the department of social work became the department of applied sociology [3, 38]. Social work was not re-opened as a master's program until a 2004 collaboration with University of Illinois at Chicago, Jane Addams College of Social Work. I was one of the fortunate 38 students that were part of the "first" cohort. Currently, 13 universities run social work programs at the BSW and graduate levels (MSW and PhD) [38]. The curriculums of the program mostly mirror social work curriculums in the U.S.A. For instance: (a) the programs use CSWE education policy and accreditation standards; (b) the core courses involve human behavior in the social environment, research, policy, practice, and field practicum; and (c) most of the textbooks used are also similar. Therefore, despite the effort of social work educators to contextualize the class activities and assignments, the curriculums require revision and transformations to have relevance and reflect the sociocultural realities.

Decolonizing is not a onetime event, but a process of decentering colonial discourse and power structures [27]. The process of decolonization requires criticizing the underlying assumptions, motivation, and values that are enacted with imperialism and [neo] colonialism, while producing and/or revealing ethically and culturally acceptable approaches to the study of issues involving indigenous people [9, 20]. It must be emphasized that decolonization does not negate collaboration with external partners and experts and seeking resources for capacity building.

6. Possible challenges

It is important to acknowledge that indigenous knowledge development has various challenges. Sillitoe and Marzano [25] pointed out that incorporating local knowledge and values into the development process, which is dominated by foreign ideas and hierarchy, requires substantial time, effort, and resources. In addition, indigenous knowledge is neither static nor uniform. Its dynamism makes the representation of indigenous knowledge difficult. And, its specificity hampers its incorporation in development policies. Moreover, in its current state, indigenous knowledge research lacks conceptual or methodological coherence making indigenous knowledge studies fragmented.

For social work schools, the challenge will be balancing the need of global presence (using standardized curriculums) and local relevance (acknowledging and building on indigenous knowledge). Global presence is important for schools since it helps in building image, attracting international students, and possibly more grants and revenue for the school.

Despite these challenges, Sillitoe and Marzano [25] affirmed that indigenous knowledge research plays a significant role in facilitating meaningful communication between development staff-social workers in our case and local people, "informing outsiders about local knowledge and insiders about what "scientific" technology offers, so that both can better understand the alternatives and realize their comparative advantages" (p. 17). Moreover, using indigenous approaches have long-term economic advantages since they would help us save money that is wasted on programs that do not work or bring about sustainable change.

6.1 Suggested actions that can be taken to decolonize social work

As referenced above, "Africans" cannot return to their traditional governance structures because of the change in socioeconomic and political environment driven by forced globalization and forced implementation of Western policies [10]. Thus, it is important to work within the current globalized structure while integrating traditional values and practices that have withstood centuries of oppression into culturally consonant forms of service and inquiry through Indigenous approaches [2]. In using indigenous approaches, it is important to:

6.1.1 Provide space for the grassroots

Indigenous approaches allow community members to voice their needs and help to capture and understand important nuances within a given context. Moreover, community members have an opportunity to speak out and actively engage in various platforms to support their wellbeing. The collective voice of the grassroots also provides proper directions to policy "makers" to address their needs based on their priorities, ensuring sustainable change.

6.1.2 Consider diversity, history, and contemporary realities

Indigenous approaches consider diversity, history, and contemporary realities [39]. Africa is a culturally diverse continent [6, 30]. Cultural and linguistic difference exists even within a country. For example, the languages spoken in Ethiopia are more than 80; in Nigeria, 250; Ghana, 76; South Africa, 23; and Botswana, 28 [6]. Religion and spirituality also play significant roles in individual and communal life [6, 29]. Thus, in the search for indigenous knowledge and applying indigenous approaches, it is important to pay attention to varying social structures and patterns of communication. Secular approaches that ignore these cultural nuances do not effectively address socioeconomic problems. In indigenous approaches, there is no standard policy and/or program to be used and universally replicated, yielding similar results [25, 39, 40].

6.1.3 Pay attention to local realities—rural-based life

Social work education, research, and practice in Africa must pay particular attention to local realities of the communities, most of which reside in rural areas and operate in a collectivist culture. The World Bank data (2018) shows that the rural population of Sub-Saharan Africa is 645 million and it is projected to be 702 million by 2025. Rural economies, and those who reside in rural areas, have largely been disregarded when developing national development priorities [41]. Regardless of the exponential growth of cities and increasing rural urban migration in the developing world, the rural communities will continue to harbor a significant proportion of the population of Africa that must be taken into account [41].

6.1.4 Facilitate learning within the continent of Africa and beyond

Higher learning institutions in Africa should take the initiative to create a platform where they share indigenous knowledge and practices through intra-continental exchange programs for African faculty. Specifically, they should revise the curricula, produce indigenous text books, and draft publications to share with the rest of the world [2]. These beginnings will make a space for reciprocity in the flow of knowledge from the "global south" to the "North" and "West."

7. Conclusion

Silliote and Marzano [25] and Midgely [24, 40] argue that the perpetuation of inappropriate policies and programs is partly due to the failure of politicians and policymakers to realize the complexity of development and the contextual nature of problems, which vary across culture and history. There is no tailor-made or generic "solution" to problems.

Therefore, acknowledging indigenous wisdom and incorporating the voices of the grassroots in policies and programs will provide us a different perspective and sustainable solution to issues related to development. We must empower people to articulate their problems and contribute their share in solving those problems since only they live with them in a given sociocultural and economic context. In this manner, indigenous approaches will serve as an intersection bringing policy, intervention, and grassroots together.

Indigenous approaches are crucial for Africans to assess the impact of imperialism and its manifestation in colonialism, liberalism, globalization, and Western forms of research. Continued reliance on the Western model and policies that are

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prescribed for Africans will only serve to perpetuate, if not enhance, the current challenges facing the continent. Without action, African countries are certain to replicate the failed and ineffective policies associated with imperialism and [neo] colonialism.

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