

Article

# **The Role of Social Work in Empowering People Living with HIV (PLHIV) for Poverty Alleviation in the Huye District in Rwanda: Indigenisation and the Role of Intermediary Social Work Actors**

by

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## **Keywords:**

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## **Abstract**

People in need (PIN), such as people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHIV), are often discriminated against, isolated and disempowered. Consequently, it is not always easy for them to fight for their survival. However, the literature has shown that once empowered, PLHIV manage to cope with social problems, particularly poverty and its ramifications. This study aimed to examine and show how social work, as an empowering profession, has the potential to contribute to the mitigation of adversities, particularly poverty, that hinder the betterment of the lives of PIN. In particular, this study examined the phenomenon of social work indigenisation as a means of re-invigorating practice approaches by drawing on the case of Rwanda. This study is based on data collected in the Huye District for my PhD research project, which was completed in January 2023. The research adopted an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, with great privilege given to the participatory action research (PAR) methodology. The research results showed that social workers are key catalysts, and are well positioned to empower PIN. For effective success, it is essential that they work with intermediary social work actors (ISWAs), and use mostly developmental approaches that should integrate indigenous practices. Ultimately, the findings of this study provide evidence that PAR is beneficial to the bridging role of ISWAs in the problem-solving process, and thus may be recommended to be adopted for adequately mitigating poverty.

**Keywords:** social work, intermediary social work actor, empowerment, poverty, PLHIV, indigenisation

## **Introduction**

Social work originated from Western countries. Since its inception, it has dealt with poverty and its ramifications, spreading progressively worldwide. It has contributed to solving various social problems instead of perpetuating criticisms about the failure to meet the needs of people in need (PIN). Indeed, social workers have been intervening at different levels by helping PIN respond to their diverse problems, although the success in enhancing the livelihoods of PIN differs between countries.

Western countries have referred mostly to remedial, residual and individualised approaches to social work, which have been ineffective in developing countries, particularly in most African countries. In both education and practice, the profession continued to be viewed from a Western perspective. According to Mupedziswa and Sinkamba (2014, p. 141), 'in Africa, social work is considered as a young profession, as it was imported from the West at the beginning of the last century. Critics have expressed concern that African social work education, because of its Western roots, lacked appropriateness and relevance.'

Without denigrating the importance of Western theories and models throughout the social work helping process, it is opportune to consider the uniqueness of the problems faced by PIN and, above all, to adopt interventions that integrate local practices. From this perspective, the actions taken by social workers must be built on the 'indigenous' and initiated from the grassroots level (using bottom-up approaches), whereby clients participate in the problem-solving process. Here, the indigenous may be understood in the sense of taking seriously the realities of African societies as they are and not as they ought to be. Indeed, as defined by Maloka (2001, p. 19), 'the indigenous is not necessarily what is traditional but whatever the African masses regard to be an authentic expression of themselves'. The great concern since the 1960s, as expressed by authors and researchers (e.g. Chitereka, (2009); Gray & Fook, (2004); Gray et al., (2014); Manyama, (2018); Twikirize & Spitzer, (2019), is how to create indigenous and relevant models of social work practice with respect to people's culture.

From this perspective, I examined this situation in the context of Rwanda in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, when social work emerged as an academic discipline and an effective practice-based profession. My intent in orienting my PhD project in this domain was to see how social work evolved as an empowering profession in the reconstruction of the country and how reference to home-grown solutions (HGSs) helps to shape it.

After a brief literature review on the status of social work in Africa and the precision of the methodology used, the findings from the data collected are briefly presented, followed by an overall discussion of the results of the study. The paper ends with a general conclusion and recommendations.

## **Social work practice in Africa**

### *General background*

*In Africa, it can be argued that colonisation destroyed much of what was good, right and just in African culture, and the problem policymakers are presently confronting arises because its international heritage, whereby indigenous modes of helping and material kinship networks were overlooked in favour of professional and educational developments. (Gray & Fook, 2004, p. 634)*

As mentioned earlier in the introduction section, social work in Africa has been stifled by Western approaches and models that emphasise remedial interventions. It has been marked by the spread of 'modern training institutions after the period of independence in the early 1960s' (Spitzer, 2017, p. 5). However, researchers such as Chitereka (2009), Nyiransekuye (2011), Kalinganire and Rutikanga (2014), Gray et al. (2017), and Twikirize and Spitzer (2019a) have converged towards the fact that social work education and practice in Africa has not yet addressed the root causes of the social problems appropriately, mostly because 'it is still struggling to find its own domesticated identity' (Twikirize & Spitzer, 2019a, p. 2).

It has been argued that the best way to accomplish the original mission of the profession to enable people to help themselves is to contextualise it. To achieve this, social workers may change the gears by reinforcing bottom-up approaches, and according to the clients the role of being real owners of their concerns. This issue was raised in the International Social Work Conference on 'Professional Social Work

and Sustainable Development in Africa' held on 19–22 March 2018 in Kigali, Rwanda. At this time, it emerged from discussions that it is possible, if desired, to shape social work in a way that suits the needs of African populations. During the conference, Sewpaul (2018) declared that the profession 'is in our hands'; thus, there is a need to re-imagine its practice by co-creating adequate solutions to local and global common problems such as poverty.

This PhD research was informed by the empowerment theory. The relevance of this theoretical orientation is that of 'treating people as subjects of development and not objects of development' (Manyama, 2018), and infusing them with the spirit of self-reliance help to recognise their own strengths and power to participate in the problem-solving process. Overall, the researcher drew on ideas from different scholars as follows:

1. Social workers should contribute a lot in helping others look in a certain direction from the perspective of social work because 'social work is not simply a way of intervening in people's lives drawing only on a common-sense approach of "doing the right thing"; instead, it goes about making sense of human reality, and uses an interpretive perspective concentrating on 'doing the thing right' (Gray, 2009, pp. 3-4).
2. For poor people to thrive, they may be empowered to help themselves by promoting their resilience to shocks, and working towards their graduation from poverty and extreme poverty within a competent and decent society. According to Hossen (2005), 'in order to provide meaningful support to the client, social workers need to empower them'.
3. In fighting against poverty, it is important that PIN are put at the forefront; consequently, the social worker should consider them as partners and establish a dialogical relationship to facilitate a bottom-up collaboration.

According to Hossen (2005, p. 201), this presupposes the following:

In working with clients, the worker tries to establish a relationship of dialogue with them, as opposed to a relationship of vertical imposition (Freire, 1970). This is done by reducing the unnecessary social distance between the worker and client. Practically, this requires, among other things, sharing information and demystifying techniques and skills used to help.

Throughout this research, a case study of PLHIV from poverty-stricken families who were gathered in associations in Huye, Rwanda, was referred to. The aim was to examine the effects of social work empowering activities on the transformation of associations' members, whether learning about the indigenisation of the profession in Rwanda is possible, and how local practices can inform international theories. In this endeavour, the role of 'empowerers', named intermediary social work actors (ISWAs), considered to be assistant social change agents who would help people in need (PIN) become empowered, resilient and overcome the pains of poverty and/or other adversities were explored.

### *Indigenising social work practice in Rwanda*

In Rwanda, various declarations have been made about achievements resulting from the integration of imported systems and local practices, although there is still a need to confirm these through in-depth evidence-based research. This drew on the incorporation of traditional mechanisms that emphasise the altruistic involvement of people concerned in restoring the social fabric. The most referenced example refers to *Gacaca*, which consists of a traditional community-based justice system that was resurrected to deal with the reintegration of the large number of perpetrators who were still in prison after the Genocide against the Tutsi. When she visited Rwanda in 2007, Sewpaul (2007) observed that in terms of *Gacaca*, social workers:

Play an important role ... in providing an oversight function; they ensure that the hearings are fair and impartial, secure legal assistance for alleged perpetrators and victims where necessary, and provide on-site debriefing and support for victims, as the hearings engender a great deal of emotional trauma... one of the most important functions that the *Gacaca* courts serve is that they allow for victims' feelings and experiences to be heard and validated within local communities on an on-going basis.

In the same sense, Spitzer (2017) considered the research of Kalinganire and Rutikanga (2014) as demonstrating how much culturally relevant practice has been incorporated into Rwandan social work. This can be linked to the country's particular circumstances, where efforts have been made to revive traditional ways of solidarity and collective work such as *Ubudehe* as a form of community action to combat poverty in order to cope with a situation of total economic and social deprivation in the aftermath of the genocide: *Ubumwe* (unity and cohesiveness), *Ubunyarwanda* (Rwandanness) and courage and hard work (Corry, 2012).

Overall, the reality in the aftermath of the genocide against the Tutsi was that the country had to be rebuilt, manifestly from the ashes, through programmes that consider the complexity of the problems that the population faced. There was a conviction that to reshape the country, the best pathway would be to draw on resilient people-centred development; thus, the government opted for unity and reconciliation policies, and privileged the bottom-up approaches from the perspective of involving citizens in the problem-solving process. Such inclusive interventions corroborate the claim of authors such as Midgely (2001), who specified that ‘the profession's individualised, therapeutic approach is unsuited to the pressing problems of poverty, unemployment, hunger, homelessness and ill-health that characterise the global south’.

Definitely, since 1999, the key concern in Rwanda has been ‘to craft a social work practice model that attends to traditional values and practices’ (Kalinganire & Gilkey, 2017). Sharing the Rwandan experience does not necessarily mean that we should forget the residual conceptions that have remained entrenched so far (Ngwanamont, 2014). On the contrary, and as specified by the participants of a study conducted in Rwanda by Uwibereyoho King et al. (2017), what is important is ‘not a total rejection of Western knowledge, but that in reality Rwandan practitioners must create a hybrid practice, as many prefer to opt for a “complementary” approach where they can pick and choose accordingly’.

## **Methodology**

This research sought to assess whether social work interventions, through cooperative associations, help members participate in development activities that lead to the minimisation of poverty and the improvement of their family and community livelihoods. The key objectives were as follows:

- To assess the nature of poverty and its impact on the lives of PLHIV within associations in the Huye District;
- To engage people living with HIV/AIDS in the problem-solving process;
- To examine the roles of social work professionals (SWPs) and ‘intermediary social work actors (ISWAs)’ in empowering PLHIV for sustainable poverty mitigation; and

- To identify and promote social work intervention approaches to the sustainable development of vulnerable groups.

Participatory action research (PAR) was used as the core methodology. The justification for this methodology lies in its ability to engage with different categories of participants who, collaboratively, provided information to the researcher based on lived experiences. This key methodology was operationalised by triangulating specific data collection techniques (interviews, focus group discussions, observations and meetings during planned field visits). Eventually, this helped not only in investigating the research problems faced by the PLHIV, but also in informing stakeholders (SWPs, local leaders, Rwanda Network of PLHIV [RRP+] and other community members) about the need towards empowering association members. In terms of PAR, the typical 'planning-action-reflection-evaluation' cycle was followed. Therefore, it was important 'to have an in-depth understanding of the different views regarding the reality as seen by the participants... and the significance of life experiences and meanings attached to those experiences, while considering the context which is the natural setting of the experience' (Mbazima, 2017). Furthermore, the researcher was interested in promoting the problem-solving process by applying directly to the associations of PLHIV the interim solutions that emerged from the progressive investigation. Hence, I chose to refer to 'applied research design' from the perspective of 'engaging them [PLHIV] in their own inquiries into their own lives' (Walter, 2009).

The study was conducted in the Huye District, one of the eight districts that make up the Southern Province of Rwanda, with 14 sectors divided into 509 cells. Huye was chosen among the districts because it was geographically convenient for fieldwork in relation to the University of Rwanda.

The investigation was conducted in direct partnership with 13 members of the social welfare workforce, and 13 representatives of 12 targeted cooperative associations constituting both the co-research team. The research team worked with 266 association members. Throughout this endeavour, the researcher's preoccupation was to effectively involve all parties in the process by targeting the identified aim of 'conducting research, and acting on the findings of that research all in the interest of



bettering the lives of a community of marginalised people' (Florczak, 2016). The ISWA, who were co-researchers from the targeted associations, were urged to represent their colleagues faithfully and competently by participating in the planned learning activities. In turn, they were expected to help association members get back on track by enabling them to work collectively, and to engage in yielding businesses.

To facilitate collaborative research and promote mutual understanding through generative communication between insiders and outsiders, two reconnaissance visits for the familiarisation with PLHIV in associations and discussion with their representatives, as well as with professional social work practitioners, were organised prior to effective PAR. The purpose of the first visit was to brief the attendees about the PhD project, and to select participants for the PAR, whereas the second visit focused on discussions about key guiding concepts and the planning of iterative activities. From these discussions, the elected representatives of the association members were designated as ISWAs. The latter were considered as assistant change agents who would help their colleagues become resilient and overcome the pains of poverty. As intervention volunteers, they were determined to ensure the effective functioning of their associations and improve members' living conditions within their neighbourhoods.

On this occasion, a consensus was reached on the meaning of the concept 'social work' in the context of Rwanda. Indeed, after open and intense discussions in the local language with the selected co-researchers, it was agreed that the word '*Ivugururamibereho*' be used to refer to the profession whose activities are devised to empower PIN, and to sustainably uplift their lives within their socio-cultural contexts. Relatedly, the social worker was named '*Umuwugururamibereho*', which means a 'social welfare empowerer'.

## **Key research findings**

The main findings of the PAR are discussed in relation to the following themes:

'Understanding of poverty and its mitigation among PLHIV in the Huye District';

'Ak'imuhana kaza imvura ihise' (It is better to be self-reliant because assistance from

outside is unreliable and unpredictable); and 'The specific role of the ISWAs: Intervention approaches and success with the use of HGS'.

### *Understanding poverty and its mitigation among PLHIV in the Huye District*

According to participants in the PAR, poverty is understood as a multidimensional phenomenon that puts its victims in a situation of inability while responding to their fundamental needs, and encompasses a set of interrelated factors that range from economic to social, structural, environmental and organisational factors. The ISWAs stressed that a poor person is one who could not generate a minimum revenue of 1000–1500 RWF a day. They further indicated that poverty is associated with lack of material assets by association members, including land, radio sets and bicycles. However, they also referred to specific psychosocial and emotional aspects of poverty that render them incapable of participating fully in community life, such as latent stigma, anxiety, stress and emotional support. Table 1 presents a list of material and psychosocial poverty indicators among PLHIV in the Huye District:

<b>Table 1 Poverty indicators, as revealed by the ISWAs</b>	
<b>Material indicators</b>	<b>Psychosocial indicators</b>
Food insecurity	Powerlessness
Incapacity to cover health expenses	Isolation
Difficulty providing school equipment to children	Discouragement
Lousy housing/shelter	Exclusion
Impossibility of getting a remunerative job	Lack of trust in his/her potentialities
Low living wages	Low self-esteem
Difficulty accessing all the required house wares	Indecent environment
	Dependence
	Suspicion
	Degradation

**Source: Primary data**

In the face of this situation, it was found that to help PLHIV achieve self-betterment, they must be integrated constantly into the complex social world they live in. They may be progressively capable of being effective participants and citizens in their respective communities. The results of the intervention and research activities revealed that with progressive awareness raising and capacity building, particularly through regular training, PLHIV became convinced that they have the potential to cope with most of the problems they faced. Furthermore, the results showed that the

involvement of the ISWAs played an invaluable role in the process because they could easily influence association members, since they shared with them various realities. From this perspective, the participants in the research, including the ordinary associations' members themselves, expressed their feelings as follows:

Throughout this PAR, I realised that it is crucial that PIN you work with play the bigger role in the problem-solving process. Indeed, the expertise is needed, but not enough to help the client help himself; on the contrary, it is wise to let him be part of the solution in the helping process. (social work practitioner)

Working under the guidance of both the socio-economic development officer (SEDO) [usually a social work practitioner] and yourself from the university helped me open horizons, and really, I managed to help the association members who became progressively convinced that they are able to do something instead of remaining fatalistic, and thinking that they are incapable to solve any of their problems. (ISWA)

Since our president started to share with us the messages from the university researcher and above all, with the regular visits she organised to our association conjointly with the researcher and the SEDO from the sector during our monthly gatherings, we were convinced that it is possible to thrive and to improve our livelihoods. (ordinary association's member)

Our presidents are playing manifestly a greater role in empowering us. We are really working hard now and closely; we are managing to pay community health insurance and school fees for our children ourselves. Manifestly, we are graduating progressively out of poverty. (ordinary association's member)

It emerged from these statements that PLHIV/PIN may be intrinsically valued and involved in solving their problems. There was a need to empower them to exploit their strengths to cope constantly with poverty without waiting for external aid. It was important to familiarise them with the idea of self-development.

Ultimately, it is important to emphasise the fact that for PIN to thrive, their choice in the struggle for change, and especially for real sustainable development, is a key factor. In fact, they must be considered 'the experts in their particular area, their participation holds the key to unlock the treasure chest of indigenous knowledge. The emphasis should be on collective participation to unlock the collective knowledge of the social and ecological system' (De Beer & Swanepoel, 2000, pp. 67-68).

However, as well demonstrated by De Beer and Swanepoel (2000), there is never an easy way out of social problems. Development is never a simple matter. For success, two critical aspects in this regard may be taken into consideration: first, that development should be holistic by encompassing the whole human being and their

environment and, second, that the PIN themselves should take charge of their development so that they could become the owners of that development. Whatever they are expected to do, they must rely on their strengths, and stay resilient to adapt to all types of surroundings. Venkat (2018) explained that ‘the strengths approach believes that all people have strengths and capacities. People can change; people change and grow through their strengths and capacities; problems can blind people from noticing their strengths; people do have expertise to solve the problem... People know best what helps them change and what stops them....’

*‘Ak'imuhana kaza imvura ihise’: It is better to be self-reliant because assistance from outside is unreliable and unpredictable*

This section is subdivided into two sections, under which selected key results are presented that show how interventions modelled on Rwandan cultural values played an important role in shaping and reshaping the association members' minds, and in making them aware of the necessity to work together so that through collective action, they managed to easily mitigate poverty.

*Benefits of gathering in associations as amplifiers of individual talents*

Traditionally, Rwandans believe that ‘Udashinga ntabyina’ [Who cannot stand cannot dance] and ‘Inkingi imwe ntigera inzu’ [One pillar cannot make a house]. The first proverb means that when you cannot keep yourself healthy, it is impossible for you to relax, while the second one means that working alone is not beneficial at all, and that acting collectively helps to easily address threatening problems. This was stated very well by PLHIV associations’ members during regular visits by the researchers:

- Together, we can overcome various problems.
- Alone, you can cultivate land for a week, but if you are two, three or five, for example, this can take only one day. Uniting efforts and working with others are crucial.
- We have always been told that collective action is rewarding, as it brings people together to help one another not only in performing concrete material activities, but also through psychosocial and spiritual support. Our representatives are inspiring us through different trainings, while convincing us that the future is in our hands. Let us build on our collaboration and wherever we are (in our associations, our families or in the community on the whole), let us join our efforts, and let us strengthen our ties so that we can accomplish much more than we did in the past. (ordinary members)

Overall, the feelings expressed by the members show that the idea of working in organised groups or associations of people who share the same interests are very

important. The co-researchers found that through associations, it was easy to mobilise people and transmit information to them using various methods. In this framework, the ISWAs and social work practitioners collaborated smoothly for the empowerment and development of the talents of the associations' members. Finally, they firmly recognised that associations are amplifiers of individual potentialities, as they facilitate the promotion of caring relationships and exploitation of the strengths of PLHIV.

*Resolution to work hard: From subsistence to self-reliance*

Throughout the PAR, the PLHIV in Huye progressively resolved to work cohesively and collectively to overcome poverty-related problems. They decided to revitalise their associations and to remain resilient, with a firm determination to shift from subsistence to self-reliance.

The PLHIV benefited a lot from their respective associations, and managed to improve their livelihoods. Their empowerment process that they underwent pushed them to form self-help groups to complement the usual productive activities of the association. They set up group savings schemes, commonly named '*Ibimina*' or '*Amatsinda*' (mutual-aid groups), which helped them initiate small scale income-generating projects (SIGP), such as vegetable kitchen gardens, in their respective homesteads. The accumulated savings were either given to members one at a time on a rotational basis, or kept until a specified date when they were shared among the members. Overall, they were convinced that for a bright future, they should build first on their own capabilities, and constantly moralise each other by referring to the following key Rwandan values: *ukwigira* (self-reliance), *agaciro* (dignity) and *icyizere* (hope and self-confidence). In brief, they should act as persons 'deserving the name of *Intore*', which means *being persons who* should find solutions to their problems instead of depending on others' support (NURC, n.d.).

*The specific role of ISWAs in empowering the PLHIV: Intervention approaches and success with the use of Home-Grown Solutions*

The close and constant collaboration and mutual relationships between the ISWAs and their colleagues (associations' members) in their respective settings were good

strategies to involve the latter in the PAR process, and to engage them in the fight against poverty. The major task of the ISWAs was to correct what had gone wrong. They were mainly provided with training to equip them with specific skills in communication, listening, leadership, assessment and evaluation processes. They were given the mission of stimulating their colleagues to mobilise possible resources and initiate SIGP.

The associations' members were convinced that the best way of addressing poverty was to combine their efforts and strengthen their solidarity. They changed gears and shifted towards developmental activities, as well-expressed by a social work practitioner involved in the research, who said, 'Instead of giving a fish to someone, we may teach him/her how to catch it, and in general, we failed to do so in the past. It is now high time we work closely with PLHIV, and I am gradually realising that the ISWAs will help us fulfil this mission' (a SWP). Another social work practitioner declared:

It is really useful to have intermediaries who should intervene from within because it is evident that we, as professionals, are not capable of being nearer our clients as often as needed. Working with ISWAs seems to be very fruitful; they are well positioned to know what is happening in the lives of their colleagues, and so they can report objectively to us for any needed expertise. (primary data, a SWP)

Realistically, the social work practitioners acknowledged their unavailability and limited ability to respond appropriately to the demands of the PLHIV. They emphasised the fact that the ISWAs were well understood, as they were aware of their colleagues' concerns; thus, it is easy to enable them adequately within the associations. The practitioners' coordinator summarises this as follows:

The work of ISWAs is appreciable. Their influential role is undisputable; they know their colleagues very well, and it is quite easy for them to calm or to comfort those in critical conditions. It is important not to continue imposing our expertise, but instead, we should equip these intermediaries with fundamental skills that enable them to deter passivity among the associations' members. (FGD with SWP)

Throughout the PAR, the ISWAs managed to be in touch with the health-centre officers, the RRP+ (The Rwanda PLHIV Network) field officer, social affairs officers and local leaders at the cell and sector levels. During home visits, the focus was on listening to associations' members, assessing their relationships with relatives and neighbours, and observing the establishment of Small Income Generating Projects (SIGP). Overall, the ISWAs described the outcomes of their interventions as follows:

- (i) There has been a change in mindset, and the associations' members are convinced that they may work cohesively to advance their associations and address poverty progressively.
- (ii) Associations' members are convinced that joining local self-help groups is an added value.
- (iii) Associations' members are eager to effectively supplement what they gain from their associations by running small projects at family level, so that they can respond more to their fundamental needs.

The ISWAs ensured that kitchen gardens were taken as models of SIGP for each family. Throughout the meetings and training sessions organised regularly, the ISWAs made the associations' members aware of their first responsibility of owning and revitalising their projects. The members were particularly stimulated to develop and strengthen internal relationships. They were also shown the importance of solving their conflicts amicably, and working collectively. Ultimately, the members were put in a situation where they could share their feelings and experiences openly, and discuss their current life conditions and future plans. The ISWAs ensured that there was a gradual change in behaviour among the associations' members, as observed by one of them:

Associations' members decided to meet once a week. They formed self-help groups through which they initiated savings and credit services. They also agreed to observe the values and principles of love, mutual visits, collective action and common understanding in all the activities undertaken. (ISWA from the Twamagane Ikibi Association)

To minimise the individual and Western remedial-based practices, and to experiment with the Rwanda-centric approaches, a particular reference was made to home grown solutions as revived best traditional practices. It is from this perspective that associations' members were often encouraged to assist each other through the *Ubudehe* mechanism, as stated earlier, or to attest their commitment to working together towards the achievement of fixed goals through *Imihigo* or performance contracts. *Imihigo* consists of making a vow to work towards realising binding set targets willingly by the members themselves.

The PLHIV's *Imihigo* were conceived in the form of memorisable short poems linked to the names of each association. This raised the level of consciousness among the members, with the name being taken as the association's 'motto' and the poem taken as the 'membership pact'. The following selected poem from the *Duhaguruke* association (translated as 'Let us stand') in the Ruhashya sector can be a good

example of expressing members' feelings and commitment towards combating poverty. *Duhaguruke's members* were preoccupied with the urge to become self-reliant.

**Poem translating Duhaguruke association members' *Imihigo***

DUHAGURUKE	LET US STAND
Twigire	Let us be self-reliant
Twubakire ku byo dufite	Let us build on what we have
Twizamure tuzamurana	Let us develop ourselves by helping one another
Twirinde gucika intege	Let us avoid being discouraged
Tujyane n'ibihe	Let us adapt to current needs

(Duhaguruke Association's members)

Overall, the ISWAs revealed that resorting to the HGS led the PLHIV in associations in the Huye District to set up guiding principles, modelling their daily behaviours and building on Rwanda's cultural values. Throughout the research and intervention processes, it is from this perspective that the associations' members adopted an ideal way of behaving and consolidating traditional values that drew on internal cohesiveness in undertaking collective activities. This consisted of the observance of six key Kinyarwanda traditional values that start with the root '**Kwi**' and are abbreviated as '**6Ks**'. These values are as follows: (i) **Kwiyizera** (self-confidence), (ii) **Kwizerana** (trustworthiness), (iii) **Kwibonana** (mutual intimacy), (iv) **Kwihanganirana** (tolerance), (v) **Kwigomwa** (unselfishness) and (vi) **Kwitanga** (bravery). The frequent use of the '**6Ks**' slogan consolidated unity among the associations' members, and stimulated tangible changes at individual, family and association levels, such as the capacity to make decisions and initiate productive actions for sustainable development.

Overall, it appears that social work plays an invaluable role in transforming the lives of PIN, and the results registered here are attributable to the use of PAR as well discussed in the concluding section. Concretely, the social work activities performed throughout this PAR endeavour led to the fulfilment of multiple roles, particularly in terms of the assessment of PLHIV's needs, planning and implementation, as well as



monitoring and evaluation with the ultimate objective to improve the social functioning of the associations' members.

## **Discussion**

The main concern in this work was to gain an in-depth understanding of the contribution of social work in empowering PIN to alleviate poverty. In this endeavour, particular attention was paid to the possibility of indigenisation of the profession based on the investigation of existing practices with HGS, which are 'appropriate to the local development context and have been the bedrock to the Rwandan development successes' (Rwanda Governance Board, 2014).

In this section, key results are highlighted and concomitantly discussed from the perspective of devising specific recommendations.

First and foremost, it emerged from this research that poverty is a preventable and multidimensional phenomenon that negatively impacts people's lives, and puts them in a situation of inability to respond to their fundamental needs, and that may be handled by the victims once well coached and empowered. This is corroborated by Nelson Mandela, as quoted by McConville (2020): 'Poverty is not natural... It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the action of human beings.'

Overall, the research findings show that in the process of fighting poverty, social workers are key catalysts and well positioned to empower PIN. However, for effective success, it is essential that they work with ISWAs and use mostly developmental approaches that integrate indigenous practices. Allowing PIN control, their situations and problems is fundamental. Hence, PLHIV should not be considered passive recipients of aid; instead, they should be empowered to play a caretaker role for themselves. From this perspective, Selener (1997) declared that more than anybody else, it is the people involved in the problem-solving process themselves who should identify and analyse their own problems in order to solve them.

No previous study has ignored the fact that expertise is needed, albeit insufficient, for implementing effective interventions. Social workers may accord space for action to

ISWAs throughout the intervention process as the best knowers of their mates' routines and as trusted enlighteners. The ISWAs may be considered as enablers of people in difficult circumstances and collaborators of professional social workers who work under the supervision of the latter by awakening, thereby raising awareness and making the clients receptive to all kinds of empowering ingredients for effective participation in their own sustainable development.

The findings of this research reveal that the success of the interventions in the fight against the erosive effects of poverty among PLHIV in the Huye District lies in constantly approaching and mobilising them through their associations. This concurs with Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) that 'the basic community organisation for empowering individuals and mobilising their capacities is the association. An association is a group of citizens working together. An association is an amplifier of the gifts, talents and skills of individual community members' (p. 119).

Associations help address life challenges and promote collective action by 'lowering the barriers preventing the poor and marginalised people from uplifting their livelihoods' (Bosc, 2018). The Rwandan traditional culture summarises this collective spirit in proverbial terms: '*Inkingi imwe ntigera inzu*' [One pillar cannot make a house]. This proverb implies that when people come together in specific social groups through which they help one another, they can achieve much more than when they struggle individually. Indeed, they undertake activities that help them overcome individual and common social problems. These activities include '*kubakirana*' (building houses for those in urgent need), '*guhingirana*' (cultivating for each other) and '*guhekerana*' (transporting the sick to health centres).

In all cases, the research findings show that what was required to handle the phenomenon of poverty among PLHIV in the Huye District was not to do extraordinary things, but to have dedicated and competent development actors, including SWP. Henceforth, social workers' unique contribution would be to empathise and not sympathise with PIN, so that they could enable them to help themselves within their respective environments. Social workers are definitely expected to 'help society work better for people and help people function better within society.... Social workers make a commitment through professional training to help

people to improve society, and to give special attention to the interactions between people and between people and their surroundings' (Segal et al., 2013, pp. 2-3).

From this research, an inference was drawn that the trio of *social work academic researcher, SWP and clients through the ISWAs* played a significant role in inspiring and empowering PLHIV. The preoccupation of the social work co-researchers was to empower the PLHIV by providing trainings, building trust, encouraging participation and collective action. All in all, this is in the line of what is considered as the central role of social work of '... inducing change not only in the person but also in the situation/environment, as well as the interaction between them' (Palma, 2005, p. 10). This shows that success in upgrading PIN correlates with a constant collaboration between knowledgeable and skilled workers, and the beneficiaries of their services.

This revelation underlies the idea that collaboration between academia and practitioners constitutes a good avenue for concretely addressing social problems and co-creating suitable solutions with clients, mainly from the perspective of making the latter responsible for their concerns, and involving them in the problem-solving process. University teachers and researchers may remain in symbiosis with field professionals on the ground, so that they could enrich each other in strategising and planning on both sides for the betterment of needy people. Obviously, this leads to thinking about shaping the future social worker, starting in the classroom, field training and curricula up to the level of professional socialisation. As indicated by Larkin (2018), 'future practitioners are taught the fundamental dimensions of professional work in their discipline—to think, to perform, and to act ethically and with integrity. The university-agency relationship should continue to be extended to the community, where the social worker intervenes after graduation' (p. 2).

Finally, PAR appeared to be a suitable methodology for social work practice. Using PAR throughout my PhD project led me to the conclusion that the problems of PIN can be overcome, and that their daily lives can be improved. Indeed, the iterative interventions conducted regularly through the triangulation of participatory methods 'empowered both the individual and the collective' (Bosc, 2018), and provided answers for the economic and social challenges faced by the targeted PLHIV. In short, PAR should be recognised as a 'praxis that could be used to mobilise social

transformations' (Zhu, 2019), although it encompasses challenges such as the discrepancies between co-researchers' roles.

In summary, the research findings indicate specific changes, such as increased awareness, self-esteem, dignity, recognition of inner talents and consolidation of relationships among associations' members, which enabled them to own and voice their problems. After getting progressively empowered, to mean that with confidence in their local communities, the capacity to accomplish activities involving them in the development and implementation of plans and projects to overcome poverty, the PLHIV in associations in the Huye District managed to benefit fully from the trainings and other technical assistance provided by the social work co-researchers. Thus, and in observance of the Rwandan proverb that 'Inkingi imwe ntigera inzu' (One pillar cannot make a house), they exceptionally revised their associations and earned incomes, which helped them transform their lives as expressed by some of them as follows: 'We are no longer frightened, we can openly express ourselves and claim our rights'; 'In our associations, we are self-employed and we manage to pay school fees for our children and we improved their nutrition.' This corroborates the saying that 'poverty is not a vice, and it is definitely vincible'.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

There is an increasing conviction in developing countries, particularly in Africa, that people-centred and bottom-up development that leads to self-reliance is the only way to overcome the critical social problems that have hampered the living conditions of citizens. It should be argued that people are endowed with various potentialities or expertise to handle the challenges that they are often confronted with.; they only need to be empowered to develop their own talents, although a certain degree of outside assistance may be needed (Heyne & Anderson, 2012). The important thing here is to avoid continuously considering Western countries as scapegoats for the ineffectiveness—to a certain extent—of the solutions and models they introduced in response to the problems of the African masses. On the contrary, it is opportune to revitalise traditional practices, and devise new models on which Western scholars can draw to reorient or re-imagine their approaches. For example, they can learn about the HGS successfully used in Rwanda.

Ultimately, it was found that PAR that is beneficial to the bridging role of ISWAs, and that favours the involvement of PIN in the problem-solving process, may be recommended for mitigating poverty. Throughout this research and the intervention processes, the ISWAs, who were the participants-networkers representing the PLHIV, were empowered to perform their task, which they did competently. In turn, their activities were directed towards empowering PLHIV within the targeted associations. This was based on yielding collaboration between social workers from academia, social work practitioners and clients to co-create solutions drawn on the associations' members' needs.

With this simultaneous process of doing research and taking action, noticeable changes occurred, and more specifically, PLHIV in associations in the Huye District adopted new attitudes and behaviours by being cognizant that relying on their own strengths, and that reinforcing collective action is important in winning the war against poverty. Hence, they revitalised their weekly activities, and strengthened rotational credit and saving structures and the family kitchen gardens.

To sum up, it is important to let everyone know that the efficacy of social work as an empowering profession lies in regular contacts with the people who experience problems within their own environment. For this to happen, the involvement of actors serving as social work professionals' messengers (ISWAs), both from the academia and the field, is commendable, and the trio could work in the following manner.

- (1) The social work academic researcher and social work practitioner meet with the selected representatives of the affected people, and have an in-depth discussion on the problem to be investigated.
- (2) Through participatory action, the trio designs the research procedures together, and plan potential iterative activities to be performed.
- (3) The social work academic researcher and the social work practitioners organise regular learning activities and training sessions provided to the ISWAs who, in turn, concurrently implement the planned activities.
- (4) The ISWAs implement the planned activities in their respective associations. The aim of these activities is to empower PIN to become

aware of their problems, and to help them find solutions to those problems by relying first on their strengths and on the existing resources within their surroundings.

- (5) At the end, an evaluation is conducted, and there is a continuation or termination of the interventions.
- (6) Subsequent interventions to control how the beneficiaries got self-empowered and acted independently are organised.

In any case, the PAR processes experienced here to mitigate poverty cannot be considered as a panacea because of the potential research pitfalls, such as the power imbalance in respect of the principle of equal participation in the research process, the limited exploratory time frame that hindered the irrevocable validation of the findings and the uncertainty about the outcome of the completion of the PhD project. Therefore, various interventions and further research to fill the gap are well recommended.

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