Editorial

Decolonizing Social Work in Africa

by

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Introduction

> 'Part of the legacy of colonialism is that Western theories and knowledges have been exclusively valorized, and indigenous knowledges have been devalued, discounted, and hegemonized by Western theories and knowledge. The proposed definition attempts to halt and reverse that process by acknowledging that Indigenous peoples in each region, country or area carry their own values, ways of knowing, ways of transmitting their knowledges, and have made invaluable contributions to science. Social work seeks to redress historic Western scientific colonialism and hegemony by listening to and learning from Indigenous peoples around the world.' (IFSW & IASSW, 2014)

This extract from the subtext of the global definition of social work, under the heading of 'knowledge', serves as an opening to this special issue of the *Journal of Comparative Social Work* on decolonizing social work in Africa. In the first global definition of social work (2001), the words 'colonialism' and 'indigenous' were hardly mentioned.[1] During the past two decades we have witnessed an upsurge in professional discourse and scholarly literature denoting a need to acknowledge the colonial past of the social work profession, and implicitly recognize a broader plethora of knowledges as equally important. This special issue contributes to this decolonial turn in social work. Zooming in on Africa, the issue presents recent research and innovation in social work, authored by African scholars and building on empirical data from diverse African contexts.

What does it mean to decolonize or indigenize social work? Both decolonization and indigenization are contested concepts, and it is not our ambition in this introduction to unpack all the controversies that surround them. However, some demarcation lines can be sketched. Decolonization is commonly used in a rather broad sense, denoting a process that involves a break with the material, conceptual and epistemological hegemony of the colonial past and a turn towards 'the right to repossess dispossessed intellectual spaces' (Harms Smith & Motlalepule 2018). In a similar vein, indigenization is usually connoting the (re)discovery and (re)acknowledgement of cultures and knowledges of either first nations people in the Global North/West or people in countries with a colonial past in the Global South. Like decolonization,

[1] An exception is found in the standards on programme curricula, where it says: '3.4 Recognition and development of indigenous or locally specific social work education and practice from the traditions and cultures of different ethnic groups and societies, insofar that such traditions and cultures do not violate human rights.' https://www.ifsw.org/global-standards/

indigenization denotes a break with a colonial past and a decentring of the dominance of Western knowledge systems and ways of life. Some argue that indigenization suggests an indirect continued dependence on externally initiated theory and practice models that need to be re-adapted to fit local contexts, a situation that maintains dichotomy in initiators and receivers of knowledge; that instead, decolonization is better fit to encapsulate the oppressive power of the colonial past (Harms Smith & Motlalepule, 2018; Tusasiirwe, 2024). Nevertheless, whereas indigenization involves a willingness to celebrate and learn from local and traditional knowledge, it may also imply a willingness to question and challenge such knowledge. The indigenization of social work may therefore be understood as the exploration and challenging of new and old terrains of knowledge, questioning how practice can be relevant and responsive to local needs, while simultaneously maintaining the ethical values of social work as a global academic discipline.

This special issue was initiated by Twikirize and Nilsen, who are part of the research consortium of the RESILIENT project. RESILIENT is a six-year project (2021-2026), financed by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) under the NORHED-programme, whose aim is to strengthen research and capacity building in social work in Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, and to enhance local relevance and the indigenization of research in social work.[2] Several of the authors of articles in the special issue are also affiliated with the RESILIENT project. An important discovery we made early in the project period was the striking dearth of publications with African authorship in the social work curricula at the four partner universities (Nilsen et al., 2023). While this may be justified (though it is still worthy of criticism) by a lack of relevance in the Norwegian case, it is certainly surprising when it comes to the Southern partner universities. These universities, and in particular Makerere University in Uganda, host thriving research-active departments of social work. Scholars at these universities have published extensively in social work. Nonetheless, only a fraction of these publications make their way to the reading lists. Why?

[2] https://resilient.uia.no/

One explanation may be the history of social work as an academic discipline in Africa. First introduced by colonialists and missionaries, social work seems to remain epistemically intertwined with its colonial past. As early as in 1981, James Midgley introduced the notion of 'professional imperialism' to describe how social work professionals uncritically transfer settler colonial theories of formerly colonized countries to countries in the Global South through international social work models and practices. In a later publication, he challenges the utility of the notion of 'imperialism' but nonetheless argues that the same dynamic still prevails (Midgley, 2008). Fuelled by international agencies, Euro-American social work epistemologies have become hegemonic, and continue to construct much of the contemporary discourse on international social work (Midgley, 2008). When hegemonic social work theories enter into authoritative literature that comes to define the profession, it should not surprise us that this literature suffocates literature that is developed locally.

Linked to this explanation, is a certain sense of what may be interpreted as either inferiority or resignation among scholars in the Global South. Kenyan Nobel Laureate, Wangari Maathai traces this inferiority complex back to colonization and the demonization of African culture and its attendant wisdom (Maathai, 2009). According to her, the long-term effects of colonization on Africans was the creation of an identity crisis where the African elite struggle to accept who they are, and rather yearn to be 'black on the outside and white on the inside', trying so hard to imitate the imagined ways of living and being white. Hence, they lack trust in their own ability to innovate, and to generate and co-create knowledge. It is therefore not uncommon for the average African elite to promote Western knowledge and culture as superior at the expense of their own cultural heritage (Twikirize & Spitzer, 2019). Spurred on by a neoliberal, capitalist world order, where knowledge dissemination is commercialized and publication outlets are mostly well-established in the Global North, African scholars find themselves torn between local and international relevance. A typical African scholar is evaluated by how much they have published in international journals. However, international here means a journal based in Europe or North America. Challenged by neoliberal capitalism and the sale of knowledge through obscenely high subscriptions and price tags on publications, the African scholar barely gets published and if they do, there is limited dissemination of this

knowledge since they do not have extensive access to the publication outlets. The same challenge applies to research. For indigenous knowledge to be validated as scientific knowledge, it needs to be collected, evaluated through systematic research, documented and disseminated. But research is expensive, and in most universities in Africa it is primarily funded by Western donors who prioritize particular themes that may not necessarily be those that prioritize indigenization. For instance, a Confucius Institute or a Centre for the Study of American Society might be established and thrive in research at an African university, compared to an indigenous knowledge hub in social work. As argued by Holtzhausen (2002), the common saying that 'knowledge is power' has to be qualified to acknowledge that the power belongs to those who have the knowledge and capacity to communicate it with the rest of the world. The exclusion of voices is a case of hermeneutical epistemic injustice, whereby some people are left in an unfair disadvantaged position when it comes to making sense of their social experiences (Fricker, 2007).

In tandem with an increasingly globalized and marketized economy, universities and curricula have become more uniform and standardized across borders. This is further exacerbated by global initiatives and programmes, developed by both international agencies such as UNICEF and WHO, and international non-governmental organizations that perpetuate standardized concepts and programmes which draw on epistemologies that have emerged in the Western world. Challenging dominant knowledge regimes may not only appear insurmountable, it is often also perceived as ethically dubious. In the very opening of her book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda T. Smith states that the word *'research' is probably 'one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary'* (Smith, 2021:1), due to its inextricable links to European imperialism and colonialism. *'(…) it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful*, she continues. The silencing of knowledge by- and from people situated outside majority cultures, is a concern raised by several scholars, which has paved the way for campaigns worldwide to decolonize universities (e.g. Bhambra et al., 2018; Mbembe, 2016).[3]

[3] We cannot write this without simultaneously recognizing the severe backlash to this campaign that we are witnessing as we are writing this introduction, especially in the USA.

As pointed out by several scholars (e.g. Gray, Kreitzer, & Mupedziswa, 2014; Midgley, 2008; Osei-Hwedie & Boateng, 2018; Twikirize, 2014; Twikirize et al., 2024; Tusasiirwe, 2024), for social work to be contextually relevant, there is a need to develop academic knowledge in social work that recognizes the colonial past, and that challenges the implicit conceptual and epistemic heritage, while simultaneously expanding local and indigenous knowledges. One important step in that direction is to make research *by* African scholars, and *from within* African contexts, more accessible for social work scholars and practitioners, both in and outside Africa. That is the ultimate ambition of this special issue.

We wish to underscore that the fact that the authors are African, and the context is African, does not automatically make the research indigenous - or even decolonial. As noted above, the terms indigenous/indigenization are indeed contested, and commonly used with reference to first nation's people in the Global North. It should be noted that the methodological nationalism that characterizes much research in the Global North, i.e., the tendency to perceive the confines of a nation-state as the natural political and social order, has obvious limitations in Africa where national borders were sketched by the colonizers. In many African countries, the notion of 'people' (understood as a relatively culturally and ethnically homogenous group) transcends national borders. Moreover, a minority is not necessarily minor to a national majority, but co-exists side-by-side with other minorities within the same nation-state.

If decolonization also implies a deliberate effort to decentre epistemological hegemonies rooted in the colonial past, this special issue can doubtingly pass as 'decolonial'. In fact, most of the authors apply theories and methods developed by scholars in the Global North. All abide by the blueprinted rigorous genres and structures for academic publications that have been standardized globally, yet have emerged in American publishing houses.[4] Doing otherwise might not pass as scientific enough. The very fact that the special issue is hosted by a journal at a Norwegian university can be seen as either a positive development or a contradiction. A positive development in the sense that it offers an opportunity for

[4] As required by the author guidelines of this journal.

African indigenous knowledges to penetrate wider publics in Europe and elsewhere, but a contradiction because the African scientific community, and most importantly social development policy practitioners, may not have access to the ideas in this publication, even though the special issue is open access, due to its distant location metaphorically.

As pointed out by Twikirize et al. (2024), there is a need to challenge the prevailing theoretical conceptualizations of social work in Africa, which largely draw on Western scholarship. The authors advocate for the potential of adopting the *ubuntu philosophy* as a decolonizing framework to advance social work education and practice in Africa. Ubuntu is the worldview of the black people of Africa from where they derive relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual knowledge, values and practices (Mugumbate et al., 2023). The Ubuntu philosophy is all-encompassing, stipulating the ways of conduct and behaviour of Bantu/people in communities. Derived from the word Muntu, or person in singular or Bantu (persons/people in plural), Ubuntu defines what being a human entails, which is about embracing values of interconnectedness, collectivity, solidarity, caring for- and about others, and the environment (Tusasiirwe, 2023, Twikirize, Tusasiirwe, & Mugumbate, 2024). Several of the authors in this special issue argue along the same lines for the need to embrace Ubuntu in African social work scholarship. Ubuntu represents just one of many philosophies around the world, and is neither in competition with- or superior to others. Consequently, when reading about the various discourses contained in the articles, it is important to approach the philosophical debates with an open mind to identify commonalities and aspects that promote mutual learning across- and within societies.

As little as ‘decolonial’ and ‘indigenous’ automatically reflect anything ‘African’ or ‘Global South’, nor do the notions of ‘West/Western’, ‘colonial/colonizer’ and ‘Global North’ have a uniform meaning. One of our concerns in editing this special issue has been the oftentimes uncritical references to ‘Western’ as opposed to ‘African.’ In our view, such dichotomous assumptions serve to uphold stereotypes that often end up reinforcing epistemological and symbolic boundaries instead of challenging them. We hope this special issue can also spur an interest in confronting such stereotypes.

The articles in this issue

This special issue features 10 articles on topics relevant to social work in contemporary Africa. These articles offer a valuable insight into realities that are often overlooked, or only partially explored in social work literature.

The first three articles offer suggestions on how to conduct research that is sensitive to local realities. The article, *'Deconstructing Social Work in Africa: An autoethnographic approach' by Zimba et al.,* explores the historical roots of social work in an African context, deconstructing the term itself and its meaning. Using an autoethnographic approach, the article highlights social work practices based on indigenous knowledge in African communities. The authors argue that Western epistemology has perpetuated the idea that social work was absent in pre-colonial Africa, thereby distorting the understanding of social work in contemporary theory and practice.

'Intersections between Ubuntu and Social Work in Humanitarian Settings in Uganda: A Decoloniality Perspective', by Buzaare et al., examines the intersection of Ubuntu and social work in humanitarian settings, particularly regarding refugees. The study explores how Ubuntu shapes social work interventions, focusing on refugee reception and integration into host communities. The study highlights how Ubuntu's values of collective responsibility align with social work principles of empathy, but may conflict with social work's focus on individual agency. Situated within a decolonial framework, the study emphasizes how Ubuntu can contribute to the indigenization and decolonization of social work practices, while addressing tensions between communal and individual values, advocating for a cautious engagement with these conflicts.

The article*, 'Engaged Scholarship through Community Social Labs: Advancing Indigenisation in Social Work Education in Uganda', by Opobo*, argues that the indigenization of social work education in Uganda, through engaged scholarship and community social labs, promotes community engagement, and integrates local knowledge into the curriculum. The study emphasizes the potential of community social labs to make social work education more culturally responsive to local needs.

In the next three articles, the attention is turned to gender, violence and sexual health. '*Experiences of child sexual abuse survivors with formal child protection systems: An indigenist perspective' by Turyomurugyendo et al.,* draws on a narrative inquiry with women who experienced sexual abuse as children in Uganda, to highlight the strengths and weaknesses in the formal child protection system, and the potential within the non-formal indigenous mechanisms to meet the needs of survivors. The authors argue that within a resource-deprived environment, accessing formal child protection services is often costly and distant for the survivors, and that building synergies between the formal and the non-formal indigenous child protection systems is essential for a more resilient child protection system that effectively responds to child sexual abuse.

In '*Navigating Tensions between Indigenous Norms and International Frameworks Protecting Women from Gender-Based Violence in Tanzania: Insights for Social Work Practice', Mabeyo and colleagues* identify culturally based practices that aim to safeguard women from abuse and violence rooted in specific contexts in Tanzania. The article illustrates the tensions that can occur between indigenous knowledge systems and universal social work values, and calls for a careful evaluation of practices and norms to promote the positive, and transform those traditional norms that may not fit in contemporary society, rather than wholesale adoption of anything indigenous. The transformation requires respectful dialogue with the community as the custodians of such knowledge and evolving practices.

'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' is based on an empirical study conducted in Rwanda, and draws heavily on the country's indigenous values of community and cooperation. *Kalinganire* examines the phenomenon of social work indigenization as a means of re-invigorating practice approaches that are endogenously developed. The author argues that social work professionals should leverage community-based intermediary social work actors to more practically integrate indigenous helping systems in problem solving.

In the following three articles, all building on empirical data from Tanzania, the spotlight is on the elderly. In *'Ubuntu: A resource for help groups for older people living with HIV in the Korogwe District, Tanzania', Kiwelu and Steen-Johnsen* utilize the Ubuntu framework to discuss the findings from a qualitative study of how older people living with HIV in Korogwe, Tanzania use help groups for informal social support to battle their daily challenges as a result of HIV and ageing in a rural context. The authors argue that Ubuntu values in a group organization are threatened by donor dependency, heterogeneity and poverty and therefore, while leveraging the strength of Ubuntu, social work practice needs to be cautious about the factors that challenge it in a dynamic and highly globalized environment.

The article *'Self-care and Productive Ageing Practices among Rural Pensioned Retired Primary School Teachers in Tanzania' by Mwinyi et al*., interrogates the construct of self-care and productive ageing from a decolonial perspective. Despite commonalities in some aspects of productive ageing informed by international literature, this study reveals distinct variations in activities and other dimensions of productive ageing, such as self-care. Consequently, this study highlights the necessity for upholding and encouraging local and context-based productive ageing practices that have proven to be beneficial, practical, relevant and responsive to local realities.

In '*Economic Participation among Older People: Key Influencing Factors and Social Work Practice Implications ', Manda et al*. explore the extent to which economic participation improves social and economic well-being for older people in Tanzania. Using the case of older persons involved in handicraft making in rural Tanzania, the authors conclude that economic participation is not a panacea for well-being, and that instead the type of economic activity and the earnings and connectedness it accords have to be taken into account. From an Ubuntu perspective, the family, community and other societal mechanisms have to be enhanced to safeguard and buttress the well-being of older people in rural areas.

The final article of the special issue, *'Political Contestations, Human Rights Violations and the Human Victims in Uganda: A Call for Social Work Actions Through Indigenous Pathways', by Bhangyi et al.,* strongly questions the social work

profession's invisibility in politics and activism in Uganda, arguing that this has undermined social work's critical contribution to challenging injustice in social policy and society. The authors challenge this apolitical epistemology of social work in Uganda rooted in the profession's colonial past, the country's violent political history, and contemporary neoliberal economic choices. They recommend that to safeguard the profession's social justice mission, the social work profession in Uganda must galvanize a commitment to engage in the politics of the day vigorously and publicly through actions that utilize indigenous pathways in building a credible political leadership that safeguards the rights and wellness of society.

Although the notion of decolonization is explicitly addressed in only a few of the articles, we think they all serve a purpose of decolonizing social work by depicting and discussing realities that often fall into the blind zones of the profession. Most articles utilize Ubuntu as a decolonizing framework, and they offer practical illustrations of what and how indigenized social work practices might look like in specific contexts. We believe that the decolonization of social work requires a more critical engagement with both current hegemonic epistemologies and epistemologies that are challenging these. In that endeavour, we also need to challenge current academic frameworks and structures that, by implication, keep many scholars in the Global South in the margins. We hope this special issue can serve as a step in a new direction.

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