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A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF TRADITIONAL AFRICAN FAMILY SYSTEM AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL WELFARE

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ABSTRACT

Beyond reasonable doubt, the influence of Western culture and civilizations has enervated traditional African family systems, and their functions as providers of social welfare. Hitherto, traditional African family and clan by extension served as the plausible medium by which Africans proffered solutions to those social, economic and other existential problems found within their communities. However, measuring and evaluating the successes of the various social welfare programs organized by the family and clan was a difficult task to achieve. It seems the services rendered merely controlled the social problems but did not improve the standard of living of the victims. This paper seeks to critically analyse the traditional African family system and its role as a provider of social welfare and argues that it can complement the Western models towards holistic social integration. Thus this work adopts the theory of change as a tool for understanding how Western models of social welfare should be integrated with traditional African approaches to care for the 'weak' in the society. Advocating for a paradigm shift from the modern models of providing social welfare to the traditional African family and clan model is consequent upon the claim that the latter is more embracing in approach.

Keywords: Social problems, Social welfare, welfare systems, and (extended) family

INTRODUCTION

Every society has people who have social and economic problems that are beyond their ability to manage or cope with. At the same time "every society at every stage of development has devised ways and means of providing services for those in need: the orphans; the handicapped; the sick; the aged and others" (Rwomire and Raditlhokwa, 6). In the modern and contemporary period of human civilization, the government or state through different agencies controlled the organization of various social welfare programs aimed at managing social problems that are endemic among the lower class, middle class and even the rich people in the country. Social problems are defined by the society as "behaviours that are considered undesirable and harmful by the society. These social conditions constitute a problem to the society because they threaten the life and future of those who make up the social community especially in relation to health and social welfare" (Duke, 82). They include: drug abuse, divorce, poverty, HIV/AIDS epidemic, hunger, gambling, racism, homelessness, murder, police brutality, etc. Social problems are historically conditioned human situations or deviant ways of life that lead to the disintegration of the family and the society at large. Thus the intervention of the society is always crucial to controlling these social problems via functioning social welfare programs.

In viewing of ensuring equitable distribution of social benefits, strengthening social integration and curbing deviant behaviours, the European nations, especially Germany, initiated social welfare programs in the nineteenth century (van Kersbergen and Vis, 38-39). This comprises the identification of the background factors that predisposed people to social problems and remedial

approach to the situation through designated social worker and social health institutions. The care given is meant to help the individuals affected to be reintegrated into the society, *ipso facto*, ensuring the social integration of the society.Concerning African response to social welfare needs of its citizens, Dixon as quoted by Candace indicates that "in Africa, social welfare programs were originally developed in the 1950s and 1960s as a safety net for white workers"(3). This claim does not mean that various African communities did not have ways of taking care of their vulnerable members prior to the coming of the European. In contemporary society, every country in the world has some forms of social welfare programs established by the government to cater for the social and economic needs of its citizens. Apart from the government, several non-governmental organizations and religious groups have been providing social welfare services to those who have social problems. Since government social welfare services and programs were established in the modern era as highlighted above, how did traditional Africans provide social welfare services to their people with social problems?

Before the advent of the Colonialists, traditional African societies had their models of ensuring social cohesion through the provision of social welfare services to those in need. These social welfare programs were carried out through the (extended) family. The family and clan social welfare system is based on the principle of communalism. This sense of the community remains the spirit upon which the substructure of traditional African society is built. But the influence of W estern civilization is weakening the African communal spirit and its family social welfare system through an upsurge in the spirit of individualism. This work seeks to critically evaluate the traditional African family social welfare system, pointing its challenges and advocating for the adoption of the theory of change as the tool for assessing and repositioning this program.

Traditional African Family System

In African traditional societies, the family is a basic cell of the society and each person lives as a member of a particular familial unit within the community (Mbiti, 17). Therefore, the family as an integral part of the society, performs diverse functions in the development of the state. It provides early education for children; it teaches social interaction and values and provides stability as well as support during difficult times. Hence, Sanchez rightly sees the family as the closest source of nurture and at any moment of brokenness of the human person because of any social ill and it is belongingness to this nucleus of the society that gives sense of stability and wellbeing at times like this (4). The earliest moral and ethical writings suggest that a society loses its strength if people fail in their family obligations. According to Beringer, some ancient Greek scholars, like Aristotle, argue that to abolish the family simply means destroying the human society. This is because the family is the cellular *oikos* that makes up the *polis* (41).

One of the things that distinguish most traditional Africans from other people of the world is the importance they attached to the family and its values. Unfortunately, a good percentage of contemporary Western societies do not attach much importance to the (extended) family and some promote the nuclear family system with a weak concern for the extended family system. Concerning social welfare, they lay much emphasis on the help that the state and society gives rather than the family's on this matter. On the other hand, traditional Africans depend more on the (extended) family as regards the welfare of those in need. This is because, despite societal changes, the family still plays a central role in many African societies. It shapes the daily experiences of all in the community. Most Africans see the society as family writ large and it serves as the substructure on which the community is built. Through the extended family system traditional Africans are able to project their philosophy of communalism. However, it is pertinent to note that

many social factors: urbanization, modernity, etc., now weaken the extended family bond and the Africans' claim on the communal spirit (Obayan, 255-256).

Nonetheless, many traditional Africans have the notion that the strength of the society is determined by the size of the family and its cohesion. Although African tradition and culture did not specify the type of family system to practice, the extended family system is predominant among traditional Africans. On this, Mbiti opines that: "for African people the family has a much wider circle of members than the word suggests in Europe or North America. In traditional society, the family includes children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters who may have their own children and other immediate relatives"(106). The extended family system practice by traditional Africans is not limited to the living alone; it also includes the living- dead and the unborn. Consequently, Ekpe declares as follows: "the family can include the collateral descendants of the same ancestor up to the fourth generation"(484).

Furthermore, the individual in traditional African society defines his or her existence through personal relationship with others in the family and the society at large. Mbiti corroborates this by affirming that: "in traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately, he owes his existence to other people" (108). The maxim that guides a person's action remains: *I am because we are, since we are therefore I am*. His existence makes meaning only within the confines of his family and society. In the same vein Ekpe avers that: "the family is the group the African can depend totally on and to which Africans owe allegiance, a group which transcends the individual and gives him/her position in society and in history" (486).

Traditional African family size increases through marriage and child bearing. Thus, polygamy is still practiced by few traditional Africans. On a related note, Makinwa-Adebusoye outlines the

major characteristic features of African family to be that they are mostly rural, patriarchal and hierarchical, polygamous and open to kinship networks, and finally, they attach substantial importance to lineage continuation(5).The African culture permits a man to marry as many women as possible even though socio-economic constraints are conditioning this practice. Yet, through marriage, families come together and new relationships are established. Making reference to the number of children in traditional African nuclear family, Caldwell and Caldwell suggest that the ideal family size in the region stood around 6 and 8 children (412). In the past, most traditional Africans marry many wives because agrarian,economic and social reasons. Therefore, the greater the number of children a man has the greater the labour force and this strengthens the notion that "a child is wealth". With the practice of polygamy and extended family system, traditional African family and clan size grows. But the emerging socio-economic cultures are changing the polygamy marriage paradigm. Children must not be the major source of labour since hired service abounds today.

Social Welfare Paradigm in Traditional African Societies

Before the advent of the modern model of providing social welfare services to citizens by the government, traditional Africans had their own way of providing social welfare services to those in need. Social welfare services were done by the family and clan by extension. It is imperative to note that most traditional Africans did not approach social problems as the contemporary does. Apollo and Logong opine that "… social needs and social problems were dealt with by the family, both immediate and extended. In those days, there was no specialized cadre of workers to handle such problems as poverty, disease or death. Such problems were dealt with by family lineage or the clan" (6). When one person has a problem that he or she cannot solve alone, help is sought from immediate and/or extended family members. Consequently, Zitha posits that

> the extended family is a long established institution which provides its members with sophisticated social security system, an economic support to meet their basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing, and a wide circle of relatives on whom to fall back in times of crisis, unemployment, sickness, poverty, old age, and bereavement(4).

Traditional Africans live a communal life style whereby they share their pains and joy together. The gap between the rich and poor is not conspicuous among them because the rich in the family carry the burden of the rest as much as it is possible. Traditional African families had their way of caring for the aged, widows, orphans and those facing various forms of challenges. This group of people were not neglected or left to suffer. Umoren vouches that: "families, lineage and clan got involved dealing with such problems. Help were sought through the extended family and intervention by neighbours was also paramount"(197). The family did not only provide the material needs but most importantly it provided psychological security for its members. This is a very significant factor when discussing social welfare (Ekpe, 487). Similarly, Kazeem argues that as a result of the family social welfare service "the African traditional ethos imposes upon the individual a number of privileges and obligations, which is essential for the survival and continuity of the society" (124). When Europeans came to Africa with Western education, the family and clan sponsored members of the family who were intelligent and willing to be educated. When beneficiaries of the social welfare provided by family progressedin life they also in the future rendered help to others who have problems and the circle continued. The 'pension' benefits the aged in traditional Africa received was the care given to them by members of the immediate and extended family.

The family social welfare system in traditional Africa has so many benefits. Kazeem explains this below:

> It provides a cheap, simple and easily accessible support for anyone in dire need of assistance. It beauty lies in the fact that it inculcated in the individual a number of values aimed at promoting social integration and harmony, commitment of the plight of others, irrespective of the situation of the individual in life (125).

The family welfare system is based on the principle of communalism which creates the consciousness of collective responsibility in the mind of traditional Africans. If the celebration of African solidarity spirit is to be rightly appreciated, one can probablysay that traditional African family laid the foundation for modern social welfare programs established by the government.

However, the social welfare services provided by traditional African family and clan had some lapses. It was difficult to evaluate the success of the programs and also the services were meant to remedy the situation but do not bring social development to beneficiaries – mostly they are short term interventions. In the case of the death of a husband who has left children, traditional African family provides social welfare in terms of organizing the funeral rites and raising the children but the wife of the late man was not empowered and there was no social welfare provided to train the children to become independent. This differs from modern social welfare program which a part from supporting the vulnerable withthe resources of the community or state, it creates positive change in the weak and needy and the follow ups that is necessary for social changes in the beneficiaries.

TheoryofChange: A **Catalyst for African FamilySocial Welfare Service**

There is no consensus among scholars with regard to the definition of theory of change. Many of them have approached it from different perspectives. Nevertheless, theory of change is often explained in terms of the connection between activities and outcomes. It connotes: “the ability to articulate this connection rest on the idea that social programs are based on explicit or implicit

theories about how and why the programs will work" (Danielle and Craig, 4). Theory of change is an approach to planning, implementing or evaluating change at the level of an individual, organization or community. The theory of change articulates explicitly how a project or initiative is intended to achieve outcomes through actions, while taking into account its context (Karen and Liz, 3). It can be defined as a systematic and cumulative study of the links between activities, outcomes and context of the initiative. Dana *et. al* explain that theory of change provides a working model against which to test hypotheses and assumptions about what actions will best bring about the intended outcomes(2).

From the ongoing, the application of the theory of change as a model of improving upon the status quo shows clearly how social welfare programs can effectively be carried out, assessed and the outcome predicted. It shows the changes that are expected to occur in the life of an individual or community when certain social programs are executed. Theory of change can take the form of a logical thinking and expression. It enables the social worker to predict the outcome of the social program even before the person executes such a social program. This theory has different forms but the nature of a particular theory of change may depend upon the motive and type of actor driving the theory of change process.

According to Rogers, "a theory of change explains how activities are understood to produce a series of results that contribute to achieving the final intended impacts. It can be developed for any level of intervention – an event, a project, a programme, a policy, strategy or an organization"(1). It is particularly useful when the intention is to learn from an impact evaluation conducted at one site and then apply these lessons to another clime. In a nutshell, the theory of changeis a model that shows the necessary developments that will occur from a strategically planned action. The

fundamental question is: how can the theory of change control the shortcomings of the family social service system in Africa?

If the aim of providing social welfare services to those who have social problems is to bring long term positive social changes, then traditional Africans have partially failed in that direction. The premise for this argument is that the services rendered by the (extended) family do not intend to bring social changes but immediate remedies to problems. It is a laborious task evaluating the short and long term goals of the family welfare programs because the system was not strategically planned. The proposed panacea to this problem is the theory of change. If the actors involved in family social service critically evaluate the outcome of their activities and systematically plan and implement their thoughts then, it would not be difficult to evaluate the social change that would occur in the lives of beneficiaries.

The traditional African family and clan social services have been acclaimed by scholars and researchers as effective. The reason is that the family social welfare system is a grass-root program that involves the direct encounter with victims. There are no cumbersome processes involved. But in many traditional African settings, the major challenge for this program is its lack of critical, scientific and reflective approach that suits the needs of contemporary society. Therefore, the application of the theory of change with its scientific based approach would cover some of the lapses found in traditional African family social service system. The principles of the theory of change would enable traditional Africans develop both short and long term social welfare programs that would result in social change within the family and community at large. In the same vein, the social and welfare services of the states in African societies should integrate the elders, in various traditional communities, into the committees or boards that handle the assistance given to vulnerable members of state.

CONCLUSION

The influence of Western civilization on the African continent can be considered a mixed blessing. One the one hand, it has improved the wellbeing of Africans. On the other hand, some important aspects of African culture have been weakened. One of such is the strong sense of the community in the lives of Africans. This has invariably changed the pattern of social welfare system among Africans as observed in this work. The government has partially taken over the provision of limited social welfare services to the vulnerable members especially the minors while the aged are being catered for by voluntary care givers.

The modern model has not been effective in Africa especially in a country like Nigeria. Lack of funds and high rate of corruption among social workers in Africa is the bane of effective social welfare services. The veracity of the matter is that victims of social problems in Africa do not have direct contact with the government, and the social programs organized by the government do not result to social change because of corrupt practices. Against this backdrop, this work advocates collaboration with the family of those in need so that social service system in Africa might be improved.

Ultimately, this paper calls for the improvement of local cultural contents in contemporary social welfare praxis in Africa. It is the case that the European model whereby the state deals directly with individuals in need is not working for the African context. It remains equally true that the African communal or familial approach to the needs of vulnerable persons is not thorough enough. Therefore, there is the urgency to apply strategic planning and execution of relief programs that the theory of change recommends to the family or clan approach to social welfare service in Africa. This will go a long to strengthening the family approach to social welfare without necessarily

forgetting the positive contributions of European model of social services to vulnerable members of the society.

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