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**INDIGENOUS PRACTICE – SOME INFORMED GUESSES.  
SELF EVIDENT AND POSSIBLE**

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**ABSTRACT**

The inability of social work practice to make a credible and positive impact on the crisis in African development calls for a re-examination of the profession. The article argues that indigenisation offers opportunities for non-Western societies to develop professional practice based on theories, models, values, and processes emanating from relevant and specific knowledge about their societies. It is necessary and possible for social work in Africa to define its mission, knowledge base, and process based on local conditions in which it must operate. It is in this context that the justification for appropriateness, and hence indigenisation, lies.

Throughout history, and within the social sciences, the number of real paradigm shifts – true fundamental changes in concepts, methods, and conclusions – has been very small. However, whereas many paradigm shifts have failed, it is also true that some brilliant ideas have, at times, been ignored simply because they did not fit existing modes of thought (Matsumoto, 2000). In this regard, Lombard's (1996:172) assertion that there may be only two clear options in relation to change - "resisting change or participating in promoting it" - is close to the truth. The choice, however, is clear. Change must be promoted.

Alternative voices have always had trouble being accepted. When Africans and others rose against colonialism and Apartheid in South Africa, there was no automatic acceptance of their position. Thus, with indigenisation, no one expects automatic acceptance, as issues must be debated and positions accepted and applied on their own merits. It is important, though, to note that the fact that some people may resist an idea does not invalidate it.

This article articulates the basis of indigenisation and underscores the weaknesses in arguments against it. The contention is that the debate on indigenisation is not infertile as suggested by some authors (Bar-On 1999; 2002). With indigenisation, African and other Third World professionals seek to develop what they see as the direction the profession must take in their environment, irrespective of its Western roots. The assumption that knowledge developed in one society cannot be used by a totally different society, and therefore that the social work developed in the west cannot be changed and used in Africa, is not supported by reality. For example, the popular belief is that paper was developed along the Nile, possibly in Egypt. However, we do not talk about paper as belonging to Egyptians. The fact that today we have Japanese, British, German, and American cars supports the argument that throughout history, societies have built upon inventions developed elsewhere for their own purposes.

The main contention is that the debate on indigenisation is not misdirected. There is no quarrel about what Western social work is, or why it was developed. Social work as "an idea" or as "a process", it is argued, can be adopted and adapted based on different values, environmental factors, and goals. Thus, in the African context, it must apply African, and not Western values. In this case, for example, social work in Africa may focus more on community and social

development than on individuals. This, in essence, may give rise to the birth of a different "social work". Herein lies the basis of indigenisation. Social work, as a profession, can, and should, contribute to Africa's development. However, it should not be applied as if Africa is an extension of the West.

It must be emphasised that indigenisation is not a claim to any discovery of a new social work profession. However, it is an acceptance of the fact that the social work profession - what may be referred to as "the idea of social work" - can be applied differently. This is because different unsatisfactory conditions require different responses based on the context in which they occur and on the factors associated with them. Thus, the issue is not how social work has developed in the West and whether it is scientific or not. The issue is what character it must have and how the "idea of helping" can be made to suit unique and varying situations.

Proposals for change - radical, conservative or liberal - all point to the enormous potential of social work if the "idea of social work" is allowed to mature based on local environmental (cultural, social, political, economic, and physical) requirements instead of being bounded by their original Western formulations. Western technologies and concepts can enhance different cultural practices if they are adaptable and can be used properly. The fact that they come from the West does not mean they must be used exactly as in the West. For example, confidentiality, as an aspect of relationship, takes on features different from the West when examined in many African settings. Though the client may be an individual, the context of practice and the demands of care often mean that other people have to be consulted and provided with information irrespective of the wishes of the client. This is exemplified by Home Based Care for HIV/AIDS patients. Here, the traditional right of clients to privacy of information disclosed in a professional relationship is usually not adhered to because it is believed that the persons exist in the context of the community ("botho" or "ubuntu") and so most care must be with reference to the community, family, etc. Again, increasingly, the overall emphasis in social work in many African countries, such as South Africa, Zambia and Ghana, is on social development as opposed to individual or group functioning social work. Therefore, it is increasingly involved in community and social development initiatives, such as infrastructural development, income generating activities, and institutional renewal, in addition to working with individuals and groups to resolve more personal social problems.

Theoretical skills are necessary to enhance the understanding and utilisation of practical skills. Thus, the ultimate aim of theories in social work is to improve practical skills. Along the same lines, self-reliance is a fundamental human quality and goal, and therefore all help given to individuals, groups or communities must aim at making them self reliant to the best of their abilities. In most societies, where economic development has been over-emphasised as the road to prosperity and glory, the failure to achieve this end has brought to the fore the need to add social dimension to the development process. In this respect, social workers' contribution to development, emphasising social aspects, is well founded. Also, entering the political arena and challenging the status quo allows social workers to participate in, and influence the national development agenda in important and meaningful ways. All these are critical ways in which social work may be implemented to enhance the quality of life in different societies. All may not be applicable at the same time. However, this does not render them useless or far fetched.

## JUSTIFICATION FOR INDIGENISATION

Bar-On (2002) starts his arguments with the concept of common sense. Common sense, though supposedly universal, is negated by the notion of "cultural superiority", "civilising the savages," "converting the heathens (the ungodly)" and "educating the primitive". The issue is that some

cultures, especially African and other non-western societies, are deemed inferior to the West because they have no acceptable knowledge and "sense" and so have to be moulded in the fashion of those who have knowledge and "sense" who must lead the way. But common sense, if fully accepted, would mean unconditional recognition of people's ability to know what is good for them and to do what they think is right and necessary for their societies. However, this is not the case since others may condemn certain actions, though logical and right for a society, as unacceptable even if it does not affect them directly.

Part of the arguments for rejecting indigenisation is based on the notion that many of the conditions social work addresses in the West are the same as those addressed in Africa, and that differences in degree do not necessarily translate into differences in-kind (Bar-On, 1999). However, if social work should focus, among others, on droughts and famine, civil wars, peace, democracy, large-scale illiteracy, and poverty as social development issues, this in itself, would make its intent, processes, and values significantly different from those in the West. Also, the shift from residual through preventive to consolidation of development efforts and outcomes will usher in a new purpose and application of social work. The fact still remains that even differences in degree can be so significant that different goals, skills, and resources may be necessary. Thus, a hungry person with access to one meal a day is different from a hungry person with no hope of a meal in any day. Likewise, a whole community beset with famine on dry land may be different from a community that is hungry but has access to productive land. They may be differences in degree but the same approach may not be used due to different socio-economic and environmental factors because the human condition is not the same across the world.

Despite its Western origins and orientation, social work in Africa is usually perceived as being organised differently than in the West. Many authors, such as Midgley (1981, 1995), Hutton (1992), Mwansa (1992), Osei-Hwedie (1993a, 1993b, 1995, 1996), and Mupedziswa (1993), argue that this social work cannot and must not function as it does in the West. The number of people who usually seek formal assistance and the type of assistance sought, especially in an environment where much of the emphasis is on informal networks and self-help at both the household and community levels, and where many of the services as understood in the West are not available, are limited. Again, in an era of economic structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), the little formal assistance that is offered is drastically reduced in an effort to make people self-sufficient and self-reliant and the economy more efficient. Thus, the very context of social service provision and the process itself should make social work different from the West. Self-sufficiency and self-reliance, among other things, have to do with peoples' ability to decide and do things for themselves. In this context, therefore, indigenisation has to do with what is real to a people and not an imposition of what others define for them.

It is also recognised that Western social work interventions are not readily transferable to non-western societies (Hutton, 1992). The criticism made against the Western social science foundations of African social work practice is justifiable. Imre (1984) notes that identifying and understanding relevant knowledge, that is, what can be known and how it can be known, is critical to the issue of appropriateness in social work. This is because social workers deal with persons and so it is important to know the many dimensions of what it means to be a human being in a particular setting and how humans are related to others. People are social beings and therefore their lives and meanings are intertwined. The awareness of the relevance of knowledge contained in the dimensions of human life is a necessary beginning of social work practice. Social work, therefore, needs a knowledge base that is relevant and consistent with the particular conditions of people in a social environment. This means identifying and understanding the major assumptions about personality and social life in that society. It is in this regard that uncritical acceptance of

Western social science knowledge becomes problematic for African social work practice because it deals with human beings in another environment. For example, in a critical sense, the concept of family and community in African societies is different from that of the West. Communalism and (social) co-operation are cherished and emphasised processes in Africa in the provision of services. Thus, social science foundations that stress knowledge related to the individual and related rights and services will not be very useful as a basis for social work practice in Africa. Again, Western world-views are different from those of Africa in the sense that the structure of socio-economic life, political institutions, and cultural processes are significantly different.

It is argued that the rightful basis of social work practice must be knowledge about a society and its needs. This knowledge must form the basis of social theory. At the same time, the issue is not simply to get rid *en masse* of whatever has been learnt elsewhere. This is because of the interconnectedness of world systems and Africa's relationship with both the West and the East (Osei-Hwedie, 1996). Thus, the issue is not to denounce (Western) social work but to define it to suit the African environment and to conceptualise an appropriate mission based on knowledge that reflects the reality of the environment. The people-environment relationship must be defined as a response to a specific psychological, spiritual, economic, social, and political context. It is only in this respect that interventions may be seen as holistic, comprehensive, and effective (Bernstein, 1991).

Increasing social work's effectiveness in Africa means constantly improving professional expertise in relation to local needs, establishing greater legitimacy, and improving social work's contributions to society. This is part of the argument for indigenisation that Bar-On (1999) dismisses. Bar-On (1999:11) sees many of the arguments for indigenisation as "little more than broad, commonsensical truths from which only equally broad and commonsensical declarations can be made" and therefore tends to dismiss many of the basic theoretical and conceptual formulations of indigenisation off hand.

Indigenisation has been used to refer to the idea that the theories, values, and philosophies that underlie practice must be influenced by local factors. It is to lead to developing practices based on the needs of a particular group of people. This means that professional social work must be relevant to the needs of different societies and so has a locality dimension (Osei-Hwedie, 1993a; Midgley, 1981). Thus, any imported knowledge must fit the local context. In view of this, indigenous knowledge is defined as local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society, based on its members' common stock of experience. This involves understanding and articulating the resources, relationships, helping and problem-solving networks, and values governing them and applying them to the benefit of clients (Osei-Hwedie, 1993a). This is exactly what social work in the West is based on and which gives support to the call for indigenisation or appropriateness in Africa.

To be indigenous is to be relevant in an appropriate context. In this regard, all activities, ideas, processes, and techniques must capture the socially constructed reality of a given society as it relates to its own social experience, shared images, social stock of knowledge, and institutional framework. Hence, since the African social reality is different from that elsewhere, this has given rise to unique cultures, institutional structures, and relationships which social work practice must capture. From this it follows that the domain of social work must be the indigenous culture from which people assign meaning to life. Culture determines one's values and norms. In effect, the social reality of a society is derived from the culture of that society, as determined and conditioned by its values, norms, and social processes.

The knowledge necessary for social work must be derived from the social reality that pertains to that society. It is through this process that the social stock of knowledge, derived from the collective consciousness or social experience of societies, may influence social work practice and make it consistent with societal needs and resources. Based on this premise, social work practice cannot, and must not be the same in all societies. In short, the main argument is that cultures do, and must, inform social work practice because any activity in the social arena is culturally and socio-economically bounded and, therefore, for social work practice to be relevant, it must be substantively related to the cultural context (Figure 1).

## CULTURAL BASIS OF INDIGENISATION

Indigenisation emphasises a cross-cultural dimension in, and approach to, social work practice. It accepts the fact that social workers have theories and facts and the research that supports them. Theories and facts can be taught and learnt. However, the fact that people can teach or learn something does not mean it accurately reflects all people. Social work has an obligation to all whose lives are touched by it, including teachers, students, practitioners, and clients, to produce accurate knowledge that applies to them. This issue includes testing whether what is true for some people (for example, in the West), is also true for others (for example, Africans or Asians).

Cultural revolution, in the social sciences, emphasises that knowledge and truth are relative: true for some but not necessarily true in the same way for others. This implies that theories have to be changed and models, knowledge, and processes adapted, at best, to incorporate the differences among people (Matsumoto, 2000). This is not an easy challenge or position to take, for the incorporation of culture as a standard and important part of social work's conceptual model requires fundamental and profound changes in the very basis of theories. This is what indigenisation requires.

Much of current social work as a science is a product of European and American way of thinking about humans and their problems. The entire practice of this thinking and of its outcomes, and the theories, processes and models that summarise our understanding of human beings and of their environments are themselves bounded and limited by the cultural context in which they evolved and exist. Thus, these theories and procedures may not have relevance to people in other cultures. Consequently, it may be argued that the cultural revolution in social work is a call to develop and incorporate unique social work of the multitude of cultures around the world that cannot be assimilated into a single social work practice.

Social work theories and practice are only as good as their applicability to people in their real lives. It is based on this notion that indigenisation asks core questions such as: 'Is available knowledge true of all people regardless of their cultural background and socio-economic circumstances?' 'If not, under what conditions are they different?' And 'how do the differences occur and why?' It must be noted that proposing and accepting a cultural basis of social work practice "is neither a panacea nor a utopia of human knowledge." (Matsumoto, 2000:15). It does not automatically make conflicts and disagreements disappear. Rather, it offers an opportunity to understand, respect, appreciate, and empathise with differences when they occur. To like or to accept the difference, however, is another issue.

Culture plays a dominant role in shaping peoples' core sense of self. The sense of self fundamentally interacts with culture to affect people's feelings, thinking, and motivation. It is therefore a key guide to understanding and predicting behaviour. Matsumoto (2000:55) emphasises that:

Because cultures differ, it then follows that different cultures produce different self-concepts in their members, and these different self-concepts, in turn, influence all other aspects of individual behaviour... The sense of self we define in a predominantly individualistic American culture is not necessarily the same sense of self as that defined by other cultures, especially collective ones.

Cultural inheritance is ever changing. The change is due partly to the fact that people and their environments are constantly changing and so are the perceptions of people about themselves and the world around them (Singer, 1987). Dima (1990:17) notes that aspects of culture relate to "behaviour – what we do; values – what is good or best; beliefs – what is true; and world – what is real". Thus, culture is a design for living and the basis of society at any given time (Namewrith and Weber, 1987; and Persell, 1987). Culture, therefore, does not refer to the past. By definition, it is what exists and not what used to exist. Consequently, the question, is what aspects of the present, should be changed in the effort to create a better life?

Cultural diversity characterises the world. The plurality of societies requires the development of a social work that is sensitive to cross-cultural biases, demands, and differences and recognises the need for a variety of interventions. The issue, therefore, is how to positively accommodate distinctiveness and differences in the idea of social work. In this view, the understanding of 'differences' is the beginning of effective communication among all social workers and the creation of a meaningful social work profession in all societies. Indigenisation does not question the usefulness of social work as a profession in the same way that the usefulness of a lot of techniques and procedures from the West are not questioned. What is at issue is finding better ways of using the concept of social work in an African society. For example, assuming that the notion that Africans expect to get advice as opposed to being counselled is right (Bar-On, 1999), then why should African educators spend much time teaching the irrelevant process of counselling instead of the process of advising and giving answers that are meaningful and useful to those seeking help from social workers?

Changes in ways of thinking and doing business, that is, in cultural values, impact greatly on social work. Walz (1995:437) asserts that "as the culture goes, so goes the profession." Thus, in a consumer-oriented society, privatisation leads to interest in private social work practice, as the motivation of practitioners is often informed by values of economic gain. Walz (1995:437) contends further that "tomorrow's social work is cast in today's social problems and the culture in which these problems are framed". In the efforts to develop social work in Africa, there is need to consider the human dimensions of development so that suitable social work efforts in the development process are based on local interests and needs.

Such notions of social work accept and promote multiculturalism. The acceptance of multiculturalism on the surface appears to contradict the idea of shared universal values. However, this is not quite the case. Multiculturalism is the recognition, acceptance of, and respect for, difference and the promotion of factors that enable smooth communication and co-operation across cultures. It relates to the social construction of economic activity with respect to social relations, cultural biases, and behavioural processes. Part of the task of social work is how to positively accommodate distinctiveness and difference in the search for, and utilisation of, common or shared values. The understanding of difference is also part of the process of identifying, strengthening and capitalising on commonalities (Osei-Hwedie, 2001). Thus, multiculturalism, in effect, recognises the existence of some commonalities. In the process of recognising common values, one must also recognise difference and accommodate both in professional practice. The creation of what Gray (1998:210) refers to as "rights-based, anti-

discriminatory social work practice”, is recognition of, and acceptance of, some minimum shared cross-cultural values, such as democracy and social justice and associated rights.

Western models of social work are indigenous - but only to the West. It is, therefore, no coincidence that there are distinctive types of social work for America and Europe. The need for an alternative model of social work in Africa stems from the fact that, to date, practice on this continent is based on a series of theories and skills developed in the West, which reflect *its* self-concept. With indigenisation, the idea of social work is not being rejected. Rather, it is being refocused to reflect new theories and a different self-concept.

## WESTERN AND AFRICAN VALUES

Comparing Western and African values, Bar-On (1999:15) arrives at a useful conclusion that the different value bases call for “different conceptualisation of society...” and that *different cultures see aspects of social perfectibility differently and require, therefore, different types of knowledge and actions* (emphasis added). Thus, it is important to articulate and implement the directions and demands embedded in such values and knowledge in order to deconstruct social work in Africa. However, Bar-On (1999) turns around to deny that this is possible.

With specific reference to values, it has been emphasised that they lie at the core of social work practice and hence are of much concern to the profession (Siporin, 1975; Perlman, 1976; Minahan and Pincus, 1977; Judah, 1979). In this regard, a clarification of the foundation of the values that underpin social work is crucial if social work is to live up to its potential. It is important to examine the values that drive or must drive the practice in African societies. If values are seen as what is good - cherished beliefs and emotionally invested preferences (Drower, 1991), then it follows that this examination should be from the perspectives of both the users and providers of social work services. It is only in this sense that the cultural context, that is, what in social work is referred to as the person-in-environment relationship, makes sense and allows the necessary elements of the human, the spiritual, and the physical to be captured in the course of providing and using services.

According to Perlman (1976), the essence of values is that they govern and guide action. Values legitimise action in the sense that they transform ideas into directions of practice. Consequently, if foreign values predominate, then the practice derived from them will be of little relevance to the people for whom these values are alien. This is not so say, however, that this necessitates that social work be grounded in so-called “traditional” values. In a rapidly changing environment, it must be sensitive and adaptable to emerging values and recognise multiple and complex ones. It must also be flexible enough to capture what Tembo (1990) calls the “collective consciousness” of a society in transition.

## “COLONIALISM KEEPS MARCHING ON”

Part of the problem with Bar-On’s (1999:15) position, however, stems from his general conclusions that, “colonialism keeps marching on” with respect to social work in Africa. After noting that different cultures see aspects of social perfectibility differently and require, therefore, different types of knowledge, actions, and skills, he proceeds to conclude that perhaps social work has not been deconstructed to suit the different peoples, identities, and positions of Africa due to her historical and colonial experience. He emphasises that as the priest sought to change the attitude and character of the heathen, so does Western education deAfricanise those who go through it. Western traditions of learning, knowledge, and practice have been instituted without question. Thus, Bar-On (1999, 2002) goes on to argue that having been Westernised, educated

Africans are not capable of original thinking and thus uncritically perpetuate what they acquire. This is far from the truth. Educated Africans have been critical of Western knowledge and theories and have been in the forefront of the fight against domination, such as was the case with colonialism and Apartheid.

Several issues arise from such a position. Western education is a tool and a process of understanding the world from a particular perspective. It may be true that some people are unable to transcend this perspective to expand their horizons into alternative dimensions. However, it must be stressed that attendance in Western education or the acquisition of Western knowledge and some of its underlying values does not mean that the African does not have, and cannot uphold, some truly unique elements and notions. On the contrary, the call for indigenisation is one such alternative course of action to be free from yet another domination. This clearly shows that non-western intellectuals think critically and have the capacity for alternatives to Western knowledge.

There is a misconceived assumption by Bar-On (1999) that Western educated Africans are deculturalised and have little in common with fellow citizens, and that indigenisation is nothing but a neo-tribalistic tendency to go back to primitivity. We are made to believe that an African who spends a few years in an American or European university becomes, by virtue of this education, a Westerner and sheds his or her 'Africanness'. When an American academic appeals to American values, no one associates that with any specific historical period. In the same way, English values and culture are not associated with primitive England. For the African, unfortunately, the values and culture must be stuck in time and hence a return to primitivity. It is worth to repeat that culture is the life of a people at a given time. Hence African cultures have to do with how they structured peoples' lives as of today and not of any imaginary past.

Bar-On (1999, 2002) contends further that Western educated Africans, having been 'westernised', can only practice what they learned and have made no changes due to the fact that they still continue to be trained in the West and that Western thinking monopolises most social work literature. Whereas, there is no argument with the latter statement, the fact that we have this discussion, and that there are many Western and Eastern educated Africans, such as Osei-Hwedie (1993a; 1993b); Mupedziswa (1993), Mwansa (1992) and Lombard (1992), who, in their own small way, are debating and analysing alternative frames of practice, supports the view that, indeed, many Western educated Africans do not swallow every Western knowledge blindly. Emphasis on social development, community, and indigenisation point to some of the alternatives being advocated for. These academics use the tools they acquired from the West to understand and serve their communities properly. On education and knowledge Lord Bacon asserted that "reading maketh a full man". It must be noted, however, that indiscriminate reading by Africans of Western literature has made some of them, in many instances, 'too full' or, rather, has destroyed their balance (Cartey and Wilson, 1970). It is this destroyed balance that indigenisation seeks to restore.

Bar-On (1999) also justifies the impossibility of indigenisation on the basis that materials and methods used to teach in African schools are not appropriate. He emphasises that these schools use texts "written for entirely different audiences – so specific that imagining that any one else can gain from them at all is difficult" (p. 18). This is precisely the problem. According to Bar-On (1999), on one hand, Africans are Westernised, but on the other hand, Western knowledge is not appropriate for their education. Indigenisation contends that the African is not a Westerner and thus most Western values and knowledge would not be appropriate for his/her needs. Bar-On admits this. But one wonders why academics would use texts and materials found defective and inappropriate. Indigenisation seeks to avoid such situations and to do what is professionally and intellectually appropriate.

There is general agreement on the ultimate aim of social work, that is, to meet people's unmet needs (Bar-On, 1994). However, the disagreement is on what needs have to be met, how they should be met, what knowledge about people should be used in this endeavour, and within what value and ideological contexts. The contention is that social work in Africa must advance values and develop a practice consistent with African life. There is no difficulty or contradiction in this.

## AFRICANIZATION AND WESTERNISATION

Based on the "tradition thesis", quoting Osei-Hwedie (1995a), and using modernisation theory, Bar-On (1999:19) suggests that "current African political discourse calls for reshaping the continent in the image of the West, using social work as one of the vehicles". He contends further that one danger of the African route in social work may mean to transport society back in time. This again raises the critical question of what is culture or society and its knowledge. It is evident that African societies are not what they were 100, 50 or even 25 years ago. African societies are not rooted in times past. What Africans do, think, have, or strive for today is part of what they are today. Culture - including ideas, structures, knowledge and skills - change to suit the demands and the character of people and their environment at any given time. Thus, Africans have never been the same since the time they welcomed Europeans either willingly or through force. For example, when David Livingstone was shown the falls *Mosi-o-Thunya*, and he renamed them after his queen, Victoria, the falls and the people around them have never been the same. Therefore one cannot assume that to talk today about the culture of Zambians and Zimbabweans around the falls means going back to the days before Livingstone.

Indigenisation and appropriateness cannot be achieved, according to Bar-On (1999:21), because the "trying conditions for those seeking this route is that they are insiders no longer". Consequently, he contends that "making the necessary paradigm shift to find the truly indigenous may be well nigh impossible unless persons 'uncontaminated' by outside constructs approach the subject". In coming to this conclusion, Bar-On (1999) seems to have uncritically accepted the idea that Africans are no more Africans because either they studied in the West, read Western books, use Western names, put on Western attire, or attend Western churches. At best, however, this is a shallow understanding of the African and the degree of interaction with the outside.

The basic premise of the call for relevance in social work practice in Africa is that there is a need for paradigm shifts. Indigenisation, as a reform process, recognises the uniqueness of culture and the need to develop critical consciousness consistent with the reality of being different. Even if the educated Africans are outsiders, the contention still is that they can initiate change. Bar-On (1999) attributes fundamental changes in Africa to missionaries and colonialists who were outsiders but denies the educated African the same courtesy even when he contends that they are outsiders. Most world revolutions have come from the inside, and world history attests to this. In reality, the majority of Africans have superficial contact with the outside and their society is nowhere as westernised as Bar-On (1999, 2002) would want us to believe.

It has been pointed out elsewhere (Osei-Hwedie, 1990, 1993a, 1993b, 1996) that social work must be meaningful through the use of knowledge, methodologies, and frameworks that are easily understood by both practitioners and clients, and be a process that can be controlled and managed by the society. Making social work user friendly may be nothing new, but to base its knowledge and methods on what the African social environment provides and can sustain is.

The idea that societies are different and function on different values is not debatable. For example, it is commonly accepted that most knowledge in the West focuses on individuals and on their quest for autonomy and self-fulfilment. In Africa, however, the emphasis is on kinship, social

networks, and groups, and on community existence and functioning. Despite this, present day reality reflects the infusion or accommodation of ideas from outside. In this case, African societies operate, as it were, in two or more systems and choose what methods, resources, knowledge, etc. are relevant in any given situation. The fact that Africans use western ideas, knowledge, and theories does not suggest a total exclusion or abandonment of local knowledge, ideas, resources, and facts. It only means that the latter must be given equal recognition, emphasis, and respect.

Africa's present day reality suggests the existence of cultures that are not always understood, often dismissed as primitive, and usually abused by outsiders. African political systems are also confused, not only because of long standing historical interference from outsiders, but also because of the combination of processes and factors that are not usually compatible. Thus, implementing Western style social work is nothing but a continuation of the confusion. This is contrary to Bar-On's (1999, 2002) argument that one argument for implementing Western social work in Africa is that it has practical advantage in putting the professional at the forefront of "progressive" change. This assertion may mean that progressive change can only be associated with the West and its ideas no matter how irrelevant these may be to Africa.

By the European route Bar-On (2002) assumes that the idea of social work cannot be translated to suit different environments and cultures because different societies do not think like the West. If what social workers regard and do is consistent with their environmental needs, then why should that be problematic? If the 'rational' and 'irrational', as the West sees them, are perceived as 'harmonious' in other cultures and it makes sense to the people, why should that negatively affect their adaptation of ideas from the West? Whether indigenisation is nothing more than the expansion of Western thought, knowledge, and tradition, it brings to the fore the need for a platform that offers a framework for contrasting and comparing different life situations and environments and for developing a profession that appreciates these.

If one accepts the idea that knowledge is increasingly internationalised, then one must also accept the emergence of new ways of thinking and doing and the capacity to ignite new processes that may challenge existing structures and develop new ones. Dombrowski (1998:374) notes that in an era of globalisation and modernity characterised by personal and institutional flexibility, "only self-conscious, active individuals have the ability to use accumulated social and scientific knowledge to organise and transform their world". Perhaps this is among the greatest gifts western education has given to Africans. Yet, when they use it, their 'Africanness' is denied.

It must also be noted that technologies and knowledge are capable of linking people across societies and cultures and of creating a global society. However, this may also encourage self-determination, assertiveness, and independence (Dombrowski, 1998). It is well known that a vast majority of Africans do not possess the education, skills, and technology that characterise the West and, for these, western procedures and values have no meaningful impact on their daily lives. Thus, the ability to understand and to challenge Western ideas, ideologies, and values must come from educated Africans who understand both the Western and African worlds.

## CONCLUSION

Social work has a significant role to play in the efforts to improve the quality of life in African societies. However, to be effective, it has to shed its foreign character and redefine its central focus, knowledge, and value base. This change requires social work practitioners, educators, and researchers to begin to assemble what is known about their environment and to outline what will form the basis of the profession. The search for appropriateness in social work in Africa, in terms

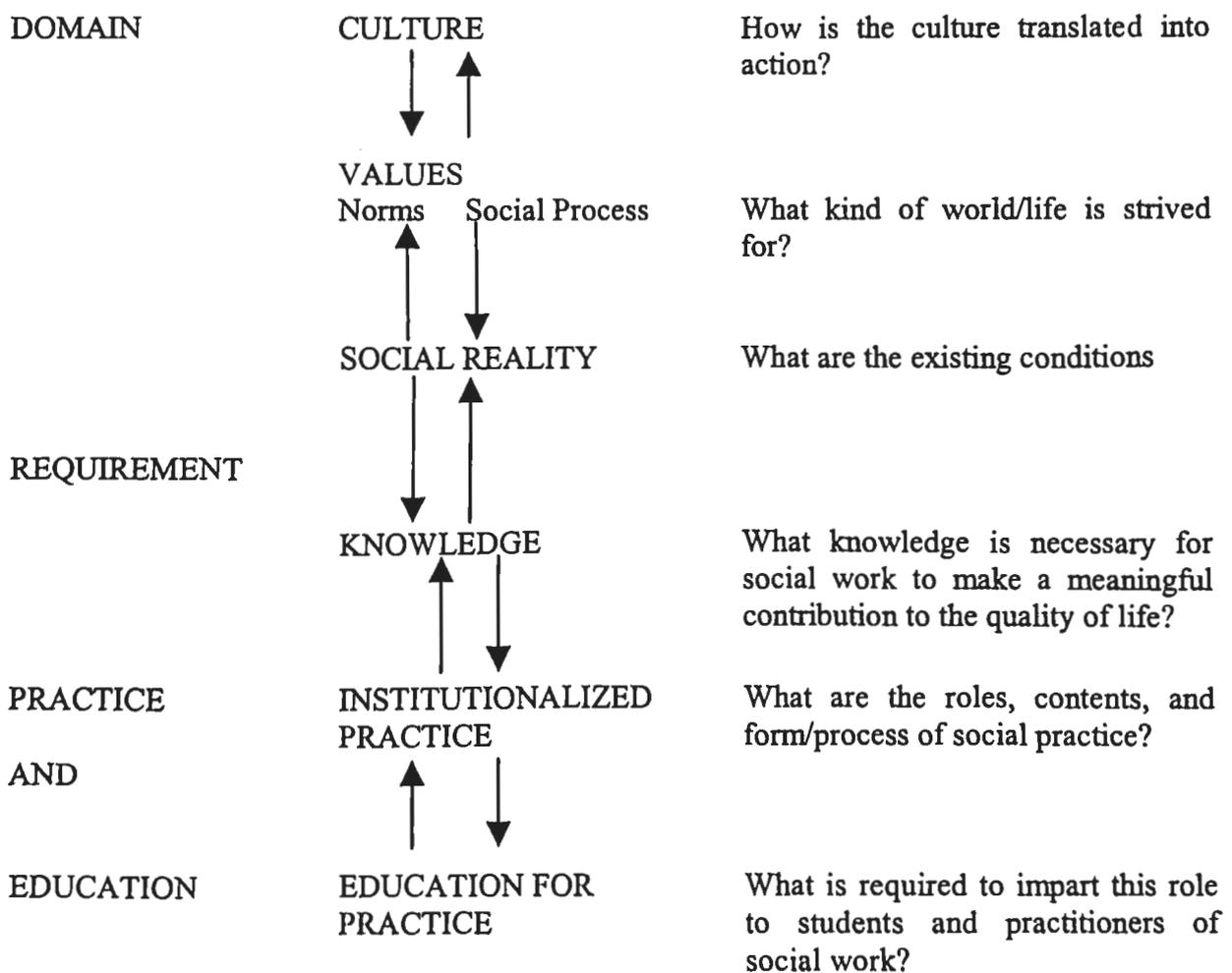
of philosophies, theories, and models, is a must. This is because social work knowledge and practice in Africa must emerge from local inputs that should then sustain them.

It is argued that African social workers can and must develop their own cumulative knowledge and define their practice skills. In this way, the idea that problems must be solved in ways familiar to both social workers and their clients becomes a reality and gives practical meaning to indigenisation. Without questioning the overall goals of social work, it is evident that Africans have their own values and that social work intervention, based on continuing social analysis, must reflect these values. It is also emphasised that all cultures, including those in Africa, are constantly changing and therefore any reference to culture which is cast as a reference to the past is narrowly conceptualised and misdirected.

Finally, it is evident that Western education and analytical processes offer some of the very tools necessary for deconstructing Western social work models and developing an alternative outlook in Africa. In the same way Africans found answers to colonialism and Apartheid, among other Western influences, so must they find answers to alien Western values and processes in their practice of social work. This is the task Bar-On (1999, 2002) argues is impossible. By his analysis, every African is touched by an outside construct and so incapable of finding a truly indigenous or local perspective in social work practice. This is part of a myth that must be dispelled.

FIGURE 1

**SOCIAL WORK FRAMEWORK: CULTURAL BASIS OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE**



Source: Osei-Hwedie, K. (1996)

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