

Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk



A professional journal for the social worker

Iphephandaba lomsebenzi woonontlalontle

Vol. 61, No. 4, 2025, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15270/61-4-1749>

Lambert K. Engelbrecht¹ and Wilberforce Kurevakwesu²

¹Stellenbosch University, Department of Social Work, Stellenbosch, South Africa

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6549-7183>  lke@sun.ac.za

²Boston College, School of Social Work, Massachusetts, USA

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4167-3052>  wilberkureva90@gmail.com

EDITORIAL

The intersectional triad constructs and the future of social work in Africa: Social development, decolonisation and professional social work regulation

Social work in Africa remains a developing profession, still defining its identity and scope. Recent scholarship has emphasised the adoption of a social development approach, the integration of decolonial perspectives, and the establishment of professional regulation as key mechanisms for advancing the profession on the continent (cf. Chidyausiku & Bohwasi, 2021; Kurevakwesu, 2023). Although distinct, these three constructs intersect in ways that strengthen social work's professional voice and enhance its capacity to respond to local and global challenges. Their implementation across African contexts, however, faces considerable obstacles, particularly because of the limited empirical evidence on their practical application (Kurevakwesu et al., 2022b; Nhapi, 2021). Advancing social development, decolonisation and professional regulation therefore requires a solid foundation in rigorous research. This corresponds with the focus and scope of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, which provides a platform for critical discourse on contemporary issues, emerging innovations and developments in global social work, together with their implications for practice, as reflected in the contributions included in this issue.

Of the three constructs, social development assumes a central role, serving as the overarching framework within which decolonisation and professional regulation can be effectively advanced. It occupies this central position because of its intrinsic connection to macroeconomic policies, which influence the broader social context. The welfare orientation of a country, and consequently the form of social work practised within it, is shaped by these policies. Within a social development paradigm, this form of practice is commonly referred to as developmental

social work (Gray, 1996). Across the African continent, South Africa remains the country where this approach has been most extensively applied since democratisation in 1994, and where related empirical studies have been conducted (cf. Chavalala, 2016; Ntjana, 2014). Nonetheless, challenges to its effective implementation persist, particularly regarding how the approach is interpreted and operationalised from the macro-policy level to the meso-management and frontline practice levels (Gray & Lombard, 2022; Ntjana, 2014).

A second country to formally adopt a social development approach is Zimbabwe, where it was officially endorsed in June 2020 (Kurevakwesu et al., 2022b). However, what has been articulated in policy has not yet been effectively implemented as a result of several persistent challenges. These include a continued reliance on remedial social work (Kurevakwesu et al., 2022b; Mhiribidi, 2010), which prioritises short-term curative interventions and, in doing so, fosters dependency among beneficiaries (cf. Midgley, 1981). Further obstacles include limited resources (Kurevakwesu, 2017), policy-practice gaps (Mhiribidi, 2010), and insufficient knowledge and understanding of social development principles among practitioners (Wyatt et al., 2010). It is particularly concerning that much of the existing knowledge on these challenges derives primarily from authors' observations and theoretical analyses rather than from empirical research. This underscores the urgent need for empirical research across all levels of social work practice, if meaningful progress is to be achieved and if a social development approach is to gain wider adoption across African contexts.

In a similar manner to social development, the decolonisation of social work has become a prominent concern within the profession in Africa. This construct is closely linked to social development, as illustrated by the case of South Africa, which, soon after democratisation, adopted a social development approach to decolonise and redress the colonial imbalances in the provision of social welfare services (Mogorosi & Thabede, 2018). The introduction of social work to Africa from the West has long been viewed as a form of professional imperialism, as highlighted in the seminal works of Midgley (1981) and Osei-Hwedie (1993). Midgley (2008) further observes that such professional imperialism continues to shape the profession, while several scholars (cf. Harms-Smith & Nathane, 2018; Kurevakwesu & Maushe, 2020) contend that the continued dominance of Western approaches in Africa undermines the recognition and contextual relevance of social work. Nonetheless, this decolonial perspective has also been described by some as either misguided or idealistic (cf. Táiwò, 2022). Despite such critiques, efforts to decolonise social work across the continent are ongoing (Nhapi, 2021; Tusasiirwe, 2022), although progress has been slow. Contributing factors include a lack of unity among social workers, an overreliance on Western literature in professional training, and the continued veneration of Western social work models across Africa (Kurevakwesu, 2023; Kurevakwesu & Chizasa, 2020).

Finally, the third axis of the intersectional triad constructs, often regarded as the hypotenuse because of its crucial role in advancing both a social development approach and a decolonial perspective, is professional regulation. Effective regulation is essential for enhancing the status and credibility of social work in Africa. However, this area has received limited attention over the years (Chidyausiku & Bohwasi, 2021; Kurevakwesu et al., 2022a). Regulation protects service users and strengthens public confidence in the profession (Hallahan & Wendt, 2019).

Across the world, professional regulation is widely viewed as central to the development of social work as a profession (Worsley et al., 2019). However, in some contexts, such as Australia, it is seen as unnecessary (Fotheringham, 2018), while others consider it restrictive to professional autonomy (Collins et al., 2002; Maylea, 2021). In Africa, only a few countries have established systems to regulate social work. These systems face serious challenges, including a lack of government support, financial limitations, weak regulatory structures and misuse of the professional title (Kurevakwesu et al., 2022a). Empirical research on professional regulation across Africa also remains limited, although several countries are beginning to make progress in developing frameworks for regulation (cf. Kurevakwesu et al., 2022a). This shortage of research restricts efforts to assess the relevance and effectiveness of existing systems. It also limits the broader implementation of social development and decolonial approaches in social work practice. Nevertheless, regulation remains essential, as it provides the structural foundation needed to embed decolonial principles and advance a social development approach.

As a journal committed to advancing social work, particularly on the African continent, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* recognises that the most effective means of addressing the challenges associated with adopting the triad constructs of social development, decolonisation and professional regulation is to establish a robust empirical foundation. Looking to the future of social work in Africa, it is clear that bridging gaps in both knowledge and practice concerning these constructs is essential. A concerted effort is therefore required to generate empirical research that can inform practice and facilitate the effective implementation of the triad constructs across all levels of the profession. In response to this imperative, this issue of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* presents twelve original articles showcasing African and global research on critical and emerging topics within social work practice.

The issue opens with a focus on indigenous perspectives and experiences. **Tankiso Phakane and Veonna Goliath** draw on social constructionism to examine the stressors and strengths present in customary marriages through the narratives of Sotho couples. Their contribution highlights how indigenous counselling practices that engage elders and community leaders can strengthen relationships and support resilience. Similarly, **Caileen Lubbe, Christine de Goede and Abraham Greeff** explore the experiences of isiXhosa-speaking single mothers within the context of *intlawulo*, or “paying the damages,” showing how challenges are shaped by whether partners acknowledge paternity and fulfil customary obligations.

Extending the scope to a global perspective, **Ferda Karadağ and Şükran Gülin Evinç** present a bibliometric analysis of child abuse and neglect research, reviewing 3,773 articles from 1980 to 2021. Their findings demonstrate both the growing quantity and impact of research over time, with a particular interest in 2021, while emphasising the ongoing need for region-specific studies to enhance understanding and prevention.

Young people are the focus of the next three contributions. **Fezeka Mbangula and Elzahne Simeon De Jager** provide insights from social workers on protocols for supporting youths leaving child and youth care centres in South Africa. **Sue Bond** examines the interplay between resilience and possible selves, shedding light on how young people envision their futures. In contrast, **Taruvunga Muzingili, Charles Gozho, Tinos Mabeza, Weston Chidyausiku and**

Edward Muzondo highlight how adoption processes in Zimbabwe can perpetuate oppressive dynamics by marginalising the voices of adopted adolescents.

Community engagement is explored in two articles. **Tafadzwa Mabemba and Pius Tanga** examine the involvement of local communities in identifying vulnerable child-headed households in Hogsback, Eastern Cape, while **Olivia Boer and Merlene Esau** assess community participation in the Northern Cape through the lens of food and nutrition service provision.

The issue then turns to specific social work challenges. **Peter Koeras and Ronel Davids** reveal the persistent barriers faced by individuals who are deaf, advocating for social workers to adopt critically conscious approaches to reduce marginalisation. **Emmison Muleya and Mziwandile Sobantu** propose strategies to empower adults experiencing street homelessness, and **Noxolo Zwane** highlights the central role of motivation in substance use recovery across inpatient and outpatient settings. Finally, **Mmatsatsi Ramokolo Kutu and Petro Botha** explore the rehabilitation and social reintegration of parolees. Their study identifies low compliance with parole conditions, limited participation in social work programmes, and inadequate resources. They emphasise the importance of coordinated collaboration among all stakeholders.

In the book review section, Lambert Engelbrecht evaluates *Navigating family estrangement. Helping adults understand and manage the challenges of family estrangement* by **Karl Melvin**, who is a psychotherapist and estrangement specialist. The book offers practical guidance on a phenomenon that can have a considerable effect on social work caseloads and requires careful professional attention.

Taken together, the contributions in this final issue for 2025 demonstrate how empirical research, theoretical reflection and practical insight can advance the triad of social development, decolonisation and professional regulation. The issue features a diverse range of research methodologies, including qualitative and quantitative approaches, bibliometric and document analyses, and a scoping literature review, reflecting the breadth and rigour of scholarship aligned with the journal's focus. In doing so, this issue not only celebrates current achievements in social work research and practice, but also charts a forward-looking path, inviting scholars and practitioners to strengthen the profession and contribute to its ongoing evolution across the African continent.

Lambert K. Engelbrecht
Editor-in-Chief

Wilberforce Kurevakwesu
Board Member

REFERENCES

Chavalala, K. I. (2016). *Perspectives of social workers in implementing the developmental social welfare approach in the Department of Social Development in Mopani District, Limpopo*. (Master's thesis). University of Pretoria, South Africa.

- Chidyausiku, W., & Bohwasi, P. M. (2021). Social work regulation in Zimbabwe. In V. Mabvurira, A. Fahrudin, & E. Mtetwa, (eds.), *Professional social work in Zimbabwe: Past, present and the future* (pp. 29-51). National Association of Social Workers of Zimbabwe.
- Collins, D., Coleman, H., & Miller, P. (2002). Regulation of social work: A confusing landscape. *Canadian Social Work Review*, 19(2), 205-225.
- Fotheringham, S. V. (2018). Social work registration: What's the contention? *Australian Social Work*, 71(1), 6–17.
- Gray, M. (1996). Towards an understanding of developmental social work. *Social Work Practice*, 1(96), 9-12.
- Gray, M., & Lombard, A. (2022). Progress of the social service professions in South Africa's developmental social welfare system: Social work, and child and youth care work. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 32(4), 429-441.
- Hallahan, L., & Wendt, S. (2019). Social work registration: Another opportunity for discussion. *Australian Social Work*, 73(20), 217–226.
- Harms-Smith, L., & Nathane, M. (2018). #NotDomestication #NotIndigenisation: Decoloniality in social work education. *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development*, 30(1), 1–18.
- Kurevakwesu, W. (2017). The social work profession in Zimbabwe: A critical approach on the position of social work on Zimbabwe's development. *Afro-Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(1), 1-12.
- Kurevakwesu, W. (2023). United we stand, and divided we fall: A call to action for the decolonisation of social work in Africa. *International Social Work*, 67(5), 1275-1278. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208728231196364>
- Kurevakwesu, W., & Chizasa, S. (2020). Ubuntu and child welfare policy in Zimbabwe: A critical analysis of the National Orphan Care Policy's Six-Tier System. *African Journal of Social Work*, 10(1), 89-94.
- Kurevakwesu, W., Chikwaiwa, B. K., & Mandau, M. (2022a). The struggle for social work professional identity in contemporary Zimbabwe: A study on abuse of the social work title. *Qualitative Social Work*, 22(2), 200–216.
- Kurevakwesu, W., Dzoma, F., Mundau, M., Magocha, J., Chizasa, S., & Takangovada, M. (2022b). Towards the creation of a developmental welfare state in Zimbabwe: An inside perspective on the Department of Social Development. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 58(2), 115–130.
- Kurevakwesu, W., & Maushe, F. (2020). Towards Afrocentric social work: Plotting a new path for social work theory and practice in Africa through Ubuntu. *African Journal of Social Work*, 10(1), 30-35.

- Maylea, C. (2021). The end of social work. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 51(2), 772–789.
- Mhiribidi, S. T. W. (2010). Promoting the developmental social welfare approach in Zimbabwe: Challenges and prospects. *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, 25(2), 121-146.
- Midgley, J. (1981). *Professional imperialism: Social work in the third world*. Heinemann.
- Midgley, J. (2008). Promoting reciprocal international social work exchanges: Professional imperialism revisited. In M. Gray, J. Coates, & M. Y. Birds, (eds.). *Indigenous social work around the world: Towards culturally relevant education and practice*. (pp. 31-45). Ashgate.
- Mogorosi, L., & Thabede, D. G. (2018). Social work and indigenisation: A South African perspective, *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development*, 30(1), 1–18.
- Nhapi, T. G. (2021). The place of social workers in Zimbabwe’s social justice endeavours. *Advances in Social Work & Welfare Education*, 23(1), 71-75.
- Ntjana, N. J. E. (2014). *The progress of developmental social welfare: A case study in the Vhembe district, Limpopo*. (Master’s Thesis). University of Pretoria, South Africa.
- Osei-Hwedie, K. (1993). The challenge of social work in Africa: Starting the indigenization process. *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, 8(1), 19-30.
- Táiwò, O. (2022). *Against decolonisation: Taking African agency seriously*. Hurst Publishers.
- Tusasiirwe, S. (2022). Is it indigenisation or decolonisation of social work in Africa? A focus on Uganda. *African Journal of Social Work*, 12(1), 1-11.
- Worsley, A., Beddoe, L., McLaughlin, K., & Teater, B. (2019). Regulation, registration and social work: An international comparison. *British Journal of Social Work*, 50(2), 308-325.
- Wyatt, A., Mupedziswa, R., & Rayment, C. (2010). *Institutional capacity assessment: Department of Social Services*, Harare: Ministry of Labour and Social Services.