




EDITORIAL

Dancing to the beat of a new drum: *Harambee* for sustainable shared futures in social work education and practice in Africa!

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The editorial in this extended issue of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* reflects on the ongoing transformation of social work education and practice in Africa towards more indigenised, Afrocentric and contextually relevant approaches. Particular attention is given to the role of the Association of Schools of Social Work in Africa (ASSWA) in promoting Afrocentric social work education through collaboration, resource development and regional co-operation. As part of the journal's diamond jubilee, the editorial further explores the integration of developmental and strengths-orientated approaches, together with the incorporation of indigenous knowledge systems and culturally relevant pedagogies into social work curricula. Against this background, the editorial argues that social work education in Africa is progressively shaping a uniquely African approach that is culturally grounded, socially responsive and developmentally orientated.

Celebrating the transformative journey of social work in Africa, this issue aligns with the theme of the Joint World Conference on Social Work and Social Development (SWSD 2026) in Nairobi, Kenya: “*Harambee* for sustainable shared futures”. The theme emphasises unity and collective action in social work as a reflection of Africa dancing to the beat of a new drum amid complex global challenges. The issue features special contributions by leading scholars, alongside articles by emerging and established African academics, as well as a research note, a practice reflection and book reviews.

During the past decade, social work education and practice in Africa have progressively begun to follow the rhythm of the continent, gradually shedding their colonial garb. Over this period, there has been notable growth in scholarly publications on African indigenous social work and social work education. These publications are underpinned by various African theories and philosophies, such as *ubuntu* and *ujamaa*, among others.

Schools of social work in Africa have made concerted efforts to decolonise their curricula and integrate more indigenous and locally relevant material into the curriculum. Specifically, the Association of Schools of Social Work in Africa (ASSWA), mandated by its Constitution, seeks to contribute to the development of Afrocentric social work education. ASSWA aims to strengthen decolonisation and indigenisation processes by providing social work educators with opportunities for consultation, the exchange of ideas and access to educational resources. ASSWA also serves as a body for channelling resources to social work educational institutions across different regions and strives to promote inter-regional, regional and international cooperation in social work education.

The shift towards curriculum indigenisation at schools of social work in Africa is evidenced by content reflecting local cultural practices, communal values and philosophies. Community-based approaches, poverty reduction strategies, culturally relevant intervention methods and indigenous knowledge systems are increasingly foregrounded in curricula. Developmental social work, with its focus on promoting human rights, social justice, socio-economic development, community empowerment, sustainable development and strengths-based practices, has been adopted by many schools of social work in Africa. This approach allows communities, groups, families and individuals to become active participants in their own processes of change and development.

Transformation, however, takes time, and many schools of social work still face challenges in adapting and shifting from Western-oriented curricula to more locally relevant content. In this regard, ASSWA aims to support schools of social work that experience difficulties in transforming their curricula by linking them with relevant resources and offering guidance to manage the process. At the same time, ASSWA also endeavours to expand and enrich its pedagogical knowledge base by creating opportunities for schools of social work to share best practices through webinars and collaborative research projects.

The indigenisation of social work education in Africa, however, can be meaningful and effective only if teaching and learning take place within an enabling environment. Unfortunately, several challenges remain, including resource and funding constraints, inadequate physical infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, limited teaching materials, insufficient digital infrastructure and a shortage of qualified academic staff. Schools of social work in smaller cities and rural areas are particularly constrained by these challenges. Furthermore, the continuous search for sufficient field placement opportunities for undergraduate students remains a daunting task for many schools of social work. Securing high-quality field placements with qualified supervisors is an ongoing struggle, as agencies are often overburdened and understaffed. In relation to social work practice,

it also remains uncertain whether agencies where students complete their fieldwork are guided primarily by Western-dominated theories and models or by locally relevant approaches.

An important building block in the development of locally relevant social work practice in Africa is the regulation of the profession and the standardisation of social work curricula. Although countries such as Kenya and Nigeria, for example, have recently made significant progress in professionalising social work, the profession remains unregulated in many African countries, and national associations of schools of social work have yet to be established. This affects professional recognition, training standards and career development. To mitigate this challenge, ASSWA can play an important role in assisting schools of social work across Africa to establish associations focused on promoting and advancing social work education, as such associations can support efforts to regulate the profession within particular countries.

Another critical area for the indigenisation and decolonisation of social work education in Africa is the integration of new technologies, and more specifically digitalisation. New technologies can provide platforms to challenge Western-centred pedagogical dominance and to embed indigenous knowledge systems within curricula. Indigenous social support practices, African philosophies and community knowledge can be documented through digital platforms and incorporated into social work education. Visual tools and simulation games can also be adapted to strengthen African-centred pedagogy, including teaching approaches rooted in oral traditions and storytelling.

Although many universities in Africa have successfully integrated online teaching and learning, digital inequality remains a significant barrier to achieving parity, as many training institutions continue to struggle with a shortage of technological facilities, limited internet access and inadequate training. Digital skills and artificial intelligence are high on the agenda of African higher education, but it remains doubtful whether equitable implementation across the continent can be achieved. At the same time, cellular phones at least provide a practical means through which social work education in many African countries can be enhanced, as most students have access to a mobile phone. Students use their phones to complete assignments, take quizzes, access learning materials, watch prescribed videos, receive support and communicate with lecturers. In this way, more equitable access to educational platforms and resources can at least be partially achieved.

Considering the achievements and challenges highlighted above in transforming social work education in Africa to embody a distinct African character, social work education on the continent is engaged in an exciting process of constructing a uniquely African approach of social work education that is developmental, strengths-orientated, culturally grounded and socially responsive. ASSWA sees itself as part of this process by assuming facilitating and enabling roles, and striving for pedagogical resource development in collaboration with like-minded associations and networks. Thus, like an old drum fitted with new skin, social work education in Africa must continue to carry historical rhythms into evolving educational landscapes, reflecting continuity amid transformation. Within this context, and in celebration of both “*Harambee* for sustainable

shared futures” and the journal’s 60 years of sustained scholarly contribution, this issue of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* presents special contributions by leading authors, alongside articles by emerging and established African scholars, together with a research note, practice reflection, and book reviews.

The issue opens with a reflective special contribution by **James Midgley**, whose foundational scholarship has shaped social welfare policy, research and academic discourse globally. Midgley offers a critical appraisal of the trajectory of social development, acknowledging the significant progress that has been achieved while candidly confronting the severe setbacks that have engendered contemporary pessimism. He advocates persuasively for what he terms "stubborn optimism", the conviction that sustained commitment to transformative change can mobilise collective agency and yield meaningful social renewal. The convening of the Second World Summit on Social Development in Doha in 2026 serves, in his estimation, as testament to the enduring possibilities inherent in global social development endeavour.

Complementing this contribution, **Pascal Rudin**, Interim Secretary-General of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and one of the Federation's representatives to the United Nations in Geneva, offers a nuanced account of how social development is understood and governed within the context of the Second World Summit in Doha in 2025, convened thirty years after the landmark first World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen. Drawing on a governmentality framework, Rudin examines the discursive framing of social development across key summit documents, organisational contributions and civil society interventions, thereby illuminating the political and ideological contours that shape international social development governance.

A further special contribution, authored by **Mel Gray** together with colleagues **Emrah Akbaş** and **Qian Meng**, engages critically with the growing scholarly and policy consensus that positions social work at the frontline of climate change response, disaster management and environmental justice. The authors subject these claims to rigorous empirical scrutiny, interrogating whether the profession can substantiate its purported transformative role in advancing environmental outcomes. This timely and provocative contribution invites the discipline to reflect honestly on the evidentiary foundations underpinning its environmental commitments. Complementing this article, a methodological research note by the authors provides a transparent account of the bibliometric procedures employed in the related study included in this issue, thereby establishing a replicable methodological foundation for future conceptual and empirical work in the domain of environmental social work.

The remaining research articles in this issue represent a substantive contribution from Southern African scholarship, spanning child protection, forensic practice, victim empowerment, rural livelihoods and social worker resilience.

Weston Chidyausiku, **Maxim Murungweni** and **Taruvunga Muzingili** examine the operationalisation of the identification, documentation, tracing, rehabilitation and reintegration

(IDTRR) framework for dealing with child abuse cases in Zimbabwe. Employing a descriptive phenomenological design, the authors reveal persistent systemic and structural barriers to effective implementation and advance five targeted policy reforms, including mandatory trauma-informed training, institutionalised child participation protocols, district-level coordination infrastructure, community-based stigma reduction initiatives and a national monitoring dashboard.

Catherina Schenck, Nicolette Roman, Derick Blaauw and Charlotte Nell contribute a mixed-methods study examining the spending patterns of child support grant (CSG) recipients on disposable nappies within a Northern Cape township, analysed through the lens of the First 1000 Days framework. Drawing on data from 193 caregivers, the authors advance recommendations directed at social work practitioners regarding the necessity of complementary strategies beyond direct cash transfers, while also drawing attention to a notable lacuna in social work research concerning this critical developmental period.

The quality and utility of forensic social work court reports is the subject of a qualitative inquiry conducted by **Jacoline Kgaba Malebana and Sufraan Smith**. Focusing on the perspectives of presiding officers and state prosecutors, the study identifies significant challenges, including the absence of standardised guidelines, inconsistent understandings of forensic social work roles, and gaps between formal requirements and practical application. Notwithstanding these challenges, legal professionals affirmed the indispensable value of such reports as expert evidence in child sexual violence cases, and the authors recommend structured collaboration between forensic social workers and legal professionals to strengthen reporting practice.

Lucy Kganyago Mphaphuli's qualitative study addresses a critical gap in social work knowledge regarding witness protection programmes in South Africa. Through purposive sampling of thirty participants, the study demonstrates that social workers frequently lack awareness of the existence, functioning and accessibility of such programmes. The findings advocate for enhanced social work involvement in the recruitment of state witnesses and call for an integrated, inter-professional approach involving social workers, the South African Police Service and prosecutorial authorities.

Mfalatsane Priscillah Sadi Motsuenyane and Hanna Nel contribute a participatory case study from Kaalpan rural village in the North West Province, employing the "leaky bucket" metaphor as an analytical tool to map local spending flows and assess economic leakage associated with social grants. Advancing a decolonised, asset-based approach within a social development paradigm, the study resonates with emerging global scholarship connecting social transfers to local economic resilience in the Global South.

The article section of the issue concludes with **Tumelo Sekgobela's** qualitative investigation into the resilience mechanisms employed by social workers rendering services to nyaope-dependent youths. Grounded in resilience theory, the study identifies positive cognitive orientation, attitudinal disposition, family support systems, professional satisfaction and religious conviction as significant coping mechanisms, offering nuanced insights into how practitioners navigate adversity in this challenging intervention context.

Beyond the research note featured in this issue, its scholarly offering is further enriched by a practice reflection from the frontlines of early professional experience. **Xola Fayo** and **Nicco Diago**, as newly qualified social workers, offer a candid and reflexive account of navigating the often-dissonant terrain between theoretical preparation and the lived complexities of victim empowerment practice in South Africa. Their contribution gives expression to significant gaps in professional formation, and makes a compelling case for the more deliberate integration of trauma-informed practice approaches, systemic advocacy competencies and structured emotional support mechanisms within early career development pathways.

The issue also features two book reviews. **Isaac Kabelenga** provides a commendatory review of *Global perspectives on social work in transition: Navigating technological, cultural, and academic challenges* (2025), edited by Paul and Dey, affirming its dual relevance to the Global North and Global South. **Danyschka Jacobs** reviews Midgley's most recent monograph, *Social protection and development: Growth, welfare and equity* (2026), noting its significance as a theoretically grounded and empirically substantiated counter to neoliberal arguments that social protection impedes development. The journal takes pride in publishing a special contribution by Midgley in the same issue that features a review of his latest scholarly work, an occurrence that speaks to the living vitality of his legacy to the social work discipline.

Taken in its entirety, this issue of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* embodies the journal's enduring commitment to scholarship that is simultaneously locally rooted and globally engaged. It reflects a discipline in active and purposeful dialogue with its colonial inheritance, asserting with growing confidence and scholarly rigour its own epistemological distinctiveness. In the spirit of the African continent whose rhythms animate this scholarship, the journal continues to dance to the beat of a new drum – advancing, together, towards sustainable and shared futures in social work education and practice. *Harambee!*

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