



Publisher

African Journal of Social Work
 Afri. j. soc. work
 © National Association of Social Workers-Zimbabwe/Author(s)
 ISSN Print 1563-3934
 ISSN Online 2409-5605

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UBUNTU AND CHILD WELFARE POLICY IN ZIMBABWE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE NATIONAL ORPHAN CARE POLICY'S SIX-TIER SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe adopted the National Orphan Care Policy at the turn of the millennium due to a sharp rise in the number of orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) from the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The policy embraced a 'six-tier system' that spelled out six social safety nets for OVC. The six-tier system was seen as a cheaper route towards curtailing the problem of child protection that had grown beyond the capacity of the government. It invoked the traditional social safety nets that had been part of traditional African society. Traditional African cultural values were centered on the notion of Ubuntu. As such, for the six-tier system to record any notable success, it had to also bring into context the notion of Ubuntu. The authors of this article contend that the government adopted traditional practices of child welfare, yet it did not also bring the apparatus (Ubuntu) which made the traditional practices successful in traditional society. This issue warrants a thorough understanding so that there is harmonization between the six-tier system as a policy document and its implementation. The authors of this conceptual article thus proffer that the harmonization of Ubuntu and the six-tier system will help in avoiding the institutionalization of children because available institutions have exceeded their carrying capacities.

KEY TERMS: six-tier system, child welfare, child protection, Ubuntu, orphans, vulnerable children

KEY DATES

Received: 02 November 2019
 Revised: 02 December 2019
 Accepted: 10 December 2019
 Published: 20 February 2020

Funding: None
 Conflict of Interest: None
 Permission: Not applicable
 Ethics approval: Not applicable

This article appeared in a special issue of the African Journal of Social Work (AJSW) titled *Ubuntu Social Work*. The special issue focused on short articles that advanced the theory and practice of ubuntu in social work. In the special issue, these definitions were used:

- Ubuntu refers to a collection of values and practices that black people of Africa or of African origin view as making people authentic human beings. While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing – an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world.
- Ubuntu social work refers to social work that is theoretically, pedagogically and practically grounded in ubuntu.
- The term ubuntu is expressed differently in several African communities and languages but all referring to the same thing. In Angola, it is known as gimuntu, Botswana (muthu), Burkina Faso (maaya), Burundi (ubuntu), Cameroon (bato), Congo (bantu), Congo Democratic Republic (bomoto/bantu), Cote d'Ivoire (maaya), Equatorial Guinea (maaya), Guinea (maaya), Gambia (maaya), Ghana (biako ye), Kenya (utu/munto/mondo), Liberia (maaya), Malawi (umunthu), Mali (maaya/hadama de ya), Mozambique (vumuntu), Namibia (omundu), Nigeria (mutunchi/iwa/agwa), Rwanda (bantu), Sierra Leone (maaya), South Africa (ubuntu/botho), Tanzania (utu/obuntu/bumuntu), Uganda (obuntu), Zambia (umunthu/ubuntu) and Zimbabwe (hunhu/unhu/botho/ubuntu). It is also found in other Bantu countries not mentioned here.

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UBUNTU AND CHILD WELFARE IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETY

In traditional society, child care in Zimbabwe was the preserve of the family (nuclear, extended family and clan) and communities. The social set-up has since changed and an increasing number of children are now unable to grow up in the above-mentioned institutions, thus necessitating 'out-of-home' care in the form of children's homes (Ministry of Labour and Social Services Zimbabwe, 2010). In traditional African society, children were just as vulnerable, but they could get solace from the extended family and the community because there were strong value systems that extended to child protection (Mushunje, 2006). Families and relatives (*hama*) were closely knit together. Phrases like 'it takes a village to raise a child' emerged from traditional African society (Mugumbate and Chereni, 2019). In the event that the immediate family was no longer there, the child had readily available safety nets. These nets related to the nuclear family and the community.

There was even an old drama, *Everyone's Child*, which aired on the national broadcaster in Zimbabwe and it was shaped by these traditional concepts. The notion of Ubuntu has remained a central tenet of Zimbabwean culture up to this day (Mushunje, 2006; Mugumbate and Chereni, 2019), but there has been cultural pluralism as a result of the forces of globalization (Hendry, 2016). This has, to some extent, swept away some of the values ingrained within the notion of Ubuntu. For instance, with the intrusion of Western cultural values, there is now a value system shaped by individualism (tantamount to *selfishness*), where a thick line has been created between the nuclear and extended families. This has been partly responsible for the failure of the six-tier system in local settings because the once functional extended family and community safety nets have lost their shine and sheen. With Ubuntu, children are thought to pass through different stages of physical growth and social development and for children to effectively graduate at each stage, they need to be in a family setting (Mugumbate and Chereni, 2019:31).

THE SIX-TIER SYSTEM AND CHILD WELFARE

In 1999, the Government of Zimbabwe developed and adopted the National Orphan Care Policy (Masuka *et al.*, 2014:61). According to SOS Children's Villages International (2014:21), the policy was formulated in riposte to the then impending orphan-hood crisis engendered by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The fast-declining national economy left the government with little options but to redirect funding where it was most required and as such, the national development agenda shifted towards tackling HIV/AIDS (Choruma, 2007:5). This meant that there was need to adopt cost-effective family and community interventions towards the protection and welfare of children. Thus, the policy sought to support traditional approaches to the protection and welfare of children while discouraging approaches that removed children from their families and communities because traditional approaches value the family and community systems. Subsequently, the policy spelled out a six-tier safety net system which promoted child protection in a clearly defined order of priority.

In essence, the six-tier system was systematized in a way that the biological or the nuclear family had to be the first port of call followed respectively by the extended family (kinship care), community care, formal foster care, adoption and lastly the residential child care facility (Velepini, 2014:12, SOS Children's Villages International, 2014:21). It was set out by the system that foster care and child adoption be utilized as alternatives for children who did not have extended families and that institutional care be discouraged as long as other options had not been fully explored. Placing a child in residential care was regarded as a measure of last resort and only to be utilized after all efforts to secure a better form of care had been exhausted. This approach to child protection and welfare is very much in line with the call for a developmental approach to social work practice that has become evergreen amongst scholars (Gray, 1998; Osei-Hwedie, 1993; van Breda, 2018; Patel and Hochfeld, 2012). The developmental approach emphasizes the need to incorporate traditional and culture-specific child protection mechanisms rather than a wholesale adoption of western approaches which were imposed on African society through colonialism.

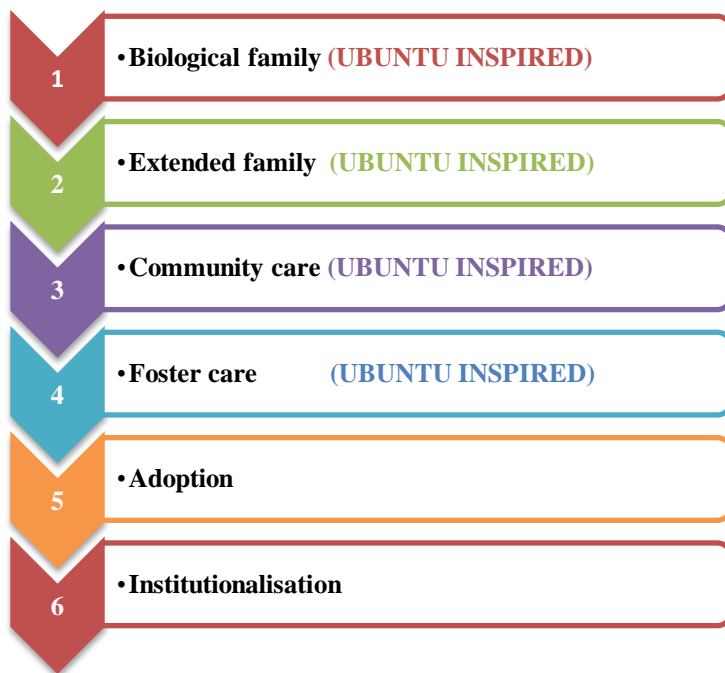
UBUNTU AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR OF THE SIX-TIER SYSTEM

The authors of this article contend that there are gaps in as far as the implementation of the six-tier system is concerned. Some of these gaps are a result of the decline of Ubuntu, among other factors. As such, it is thus important to explore the reasons why this situation is obtaining as this will provide a strong platform for coming up with feasible interventions. While the six-tier system relegated residential care facilities as a last resort to child protection, it is conceivable to note that this has only remained an elusive dream (Muchinako *et al.*, 2018). In fact, the numbers of residential care facilities as well as the numbers of children in these facilities have continued to grow. A study by UNICEF (2006) revealed that the number of privately funded institutional child care facilities in Zimbabwe had grown to the extent that twenty-four new child care institutions were built between 1994 and 2004; and the number of children in residential care doubled by then. Residential care facilities continue to be heavily

utilized despite the well documented challenges associated with them (Dziro, 2013 *et al*; Muzingili, 2017). The second international conference on children and residential care held in Stockholm in May 2003 came up with the ‘Stockholm Declaration’ which indicated that the negative impact of institutional care had to be prevented by reducing the use of institutions and strengthening community-based approaches such as re-integration among others (Muguwe *et al.*, 2011).

A major question that has to be answered is, why residential care has been the most utilized yet it is regarded as the last resort measure? The answer to this question is largely found in the unprecedented decline of the African communitarian way of life, especially the use of values related to Ubuntu. In line with the six-tier system, when the immediate family is no longer present or unable to care and protect children, the extended family should be the first option followed by community care then foster care. However, the success of such an approach is exclusively dependent on an enduring moral fibre where everything is viewed in terms of the common good (Ndondo and Mhlanga, 2014:1). Colonialism, globalization, autocratic rule, corruption and recurring economic difficulties have all combined to shrink the value of Ubuntu while many people have been forced to move out of their communities or even countries in search of greener pastures. This has brought about cultural pluralism which has gone to further erode the values aligned to Ubuntu (Ndondo and Mhlanga, 2014:1; Eliastam, 2015). In other terms, the decline of Ubuntu has diminished the value of the extended family and the community in the six-tier system.

THE INTENDED SIX-TIER SYSTEM



This desire to return to something uniquely African upon which to build post-colonial and post-conflict African societies is not matchless. Eliastam (2015:1) postulates that as African countries have emerged from colonial rule and attempted to transform their societies, such attempts have often been directed towards the return to something from their past that is deemed to be noble or worthy. The writers are not suggesting going back to the past, but rather drawing some apparatuses that were used to make things work in the past and try to bring them into context. This is necessitated by the fact that in adopting the six-tier system, the government tapped something from the past and as such, what made the notion to work in the past needs to be given due consideration. Without doing this, achieving the goals of the National Orphan care Policy will remain a pipedream.

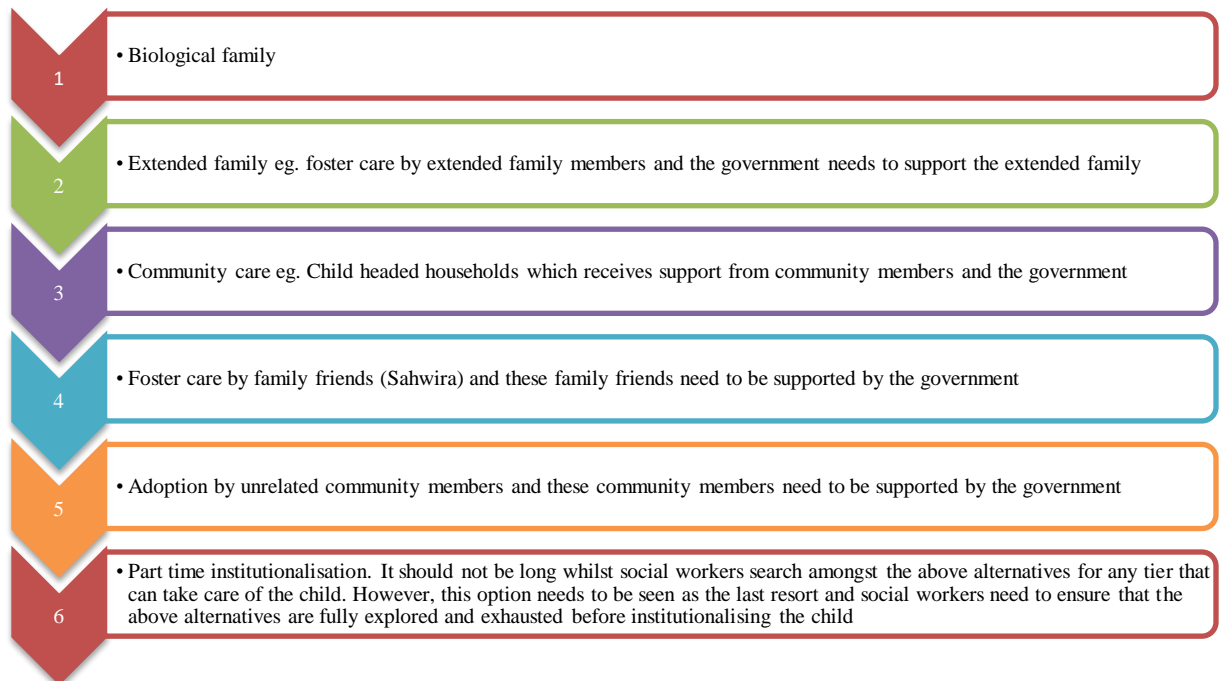
From the above discussion, it is clear that there is need to harmonize the six-tier system with the notion of Ubuntu. The ‘how’ to achieving that seems to be daunting, but efforts need to be made because children need to be protected as they are the future. With some cultural aspects related to Ubuntu having been eroded by issues related to colonialism, corruption, globalization and autocratic rule, it then becomes difficult to deal with these issues because they are way too intricate. Rather, focus should be on realigning the implementation of the six-tier system with Ubuntu through means that are within reach. The first best prescription would be to push the

government to fortify Ubuntu in Zimbabwean society. Another way of doing this is through lobbying and advocacy by professionals and pressure groups that work within the confines of the six-tier system and those committed to child welfare.

However, even before this is done, there is need to provide more literature on Ubuntu so that practitioners are conscientized of its importance and thus, understand how to push through the agenda. Education systems, from primary education up to tertiary education need to reorient their curricula so that it carries some aspects related to instilling the values of Ubuntu in learners. At University level, the writers argue that it would even be helpful to come up with a compulsory course, just as the Professional and Academic Communication Skills course. This will aid in bringing back the notion of ‘oneness’ into Zimbabwean society. This is important because in traditional society, people were socialized through the family system, but nowadays, it has become somewhat difficult for the family to effectively socialize a child on such issues due to issues related to the contemporary family values of individualism. As such, using the education system can help in this regard because almost all children go through this system.

The other way that can be important is that of strengthening the existing extended family so that it can be able to accept the responsibility of taking care of orphans. Extended family members usually shun this responsibility due to financial constraints and various other challenges. These challenges need to be brought to the fore and support needs to be given by the government and various other actors. The government of Zimbabwe already has provisions for such families, but they are not being successfully implemented due to budgetary constraints among other reasons. Moreover, the government and private actors are already channeling a lot of resources towards institutionalization. As such, there is need to redirect these funds towards strengthening Ubuntu inspired approaches shown in the figure below. For instance, all households (biological family members, extended family members, family friends, community members) that take care of orphans need to be actively assisted by the government and private actors. Additionally, there seems to be lack of coordination between the government and private actors when it comes to financing institutions (lack of coordination in relation to objectives of the government and the private actors). The government is trying to reduce institutionalization whilst private actors want to provide more funding to these institutions. As such, there will be need for strong collaboration between the government and private actors so as to achieve the main goal of the government and in this way, the notion of Ubuntu will be entrenched. The diagram below shows the proposed six-tier system that is inspired by Ubuntu.

THE UBUNTU-INSPIRED SIX-TIER SYSTEM



CONCLUSIONS

In the final analysis, Ubuntu is seen as the notion that defines humanness and it shapes African society. The notion of Ubuntu, as it applied in traditional society, helped in providing safety nets to OVC. The government then borrowed from this traditional system. However, the system they adopted is semi-traditional as it has some aspects of western society (adoption and institutionalization). Moreover, for the traditional aspects of the six-tier

system to work, there is need to align them with traditional values because without a climate induced by the values of Ubuntu, it is difficult for the extended family and the community to take care of its own. As such, the authors advocate for the rearmament of the six-tier system with the traditional values of Ubuntu if some of the challenges that have been affecting the implementation of the system are to be addressed. This is very critical because children need to be nurtured in family and community environments and what has been obtaining on the ground is that most children are being institutionalized, yet institutionalization has been seen to have several detriments on proper child development.

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