

# A Literature Review on the Dimensions of Ubuntu Philosophy Toward Child Protection in Africa – A Case of Para-social Work Model in Tanzania

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***Tanzania experienced a significant increase in the number of orphans and vulnerable children (OVC). The increase in OVCs was influenced by the HIV and AIDS pandemic, poverty, urbanisation, and unemployment. HIV and AIDS pandemic posed a great challenge to Ubuntu systems that were used to protect children in the African context. The article used the Ubuntu conceptual framework to guide the review of the para-social work model as a voluntary childcare cadre at the community level in Tanzania. The review showed that stakeholders reformed a sort of African Ubuntu mechanism known as para social work (PSW) cadre with voluntarily and community-owned aspects to serve OVC, and this modified voluntary cadre embraced African cultural values, ecology, and formal social welfare system improved the welfare and quality of life of children and their families. Para-social work model has continued to prove that African Ubuntu-related models and the formal social welfare mechanism can work together in the provision of social welfare services. In conclusion, since para social work embraces an ecological approach then it's an urgent call to re-open doors for new strategies on this Ubuntu model of child protection that can be applied in Africa and elsewhere in the World. It was recommended for more advocacies of the PSW cadre and integration of their expertise into larger government framework.***

**Keyword: Child Protection, indigenous practice, para social work, social work Tanzania, Ubuntu Philosophy**

## INTRODUCTION

Historically, the practice of child protection was observed in every human society in the World and pre-colonial Africa each society established a traditional system to protect vulnerable populations known as Ubuntu (Mugumbate & TACAIDS, 2013). Throughout African history, child protection was integral part of Ubuntu philosophy grounded under community

approach that embraced cultural values and ecology relevant to human excellence (Makuu, 2017)). Ubuntu renders an evidence-based practice on existing knowledge and wisdom of how African communities and families nurture their children (Van Bredda, 2015). Like the rest of African societies, Tanzania possessed a strong traditional mechanism that embraced child protection guided by various Ubuntu motto such as someone's child is your child (*mtoto wa mwenzio ni wako*), a child is a national treasure (*mtoto ni hazina ya taifa*) and a child is a tomorrow's nation (*mtoto ni taifa la kesho*). Ubuntu's model of child protection in Tanzania was disturbed by the imported colonial social welfare system during colonialism and related colonial legacy (Lembuka, 2023a). Post-colonial Tanzania practically restored the Ubuntu mechanism necessary through community child protection and welfare relevant in African through the Arusha Declaration of 1967 and later integration of social work and Ubuntu values in the 2000s (Nyerere, 2011). The article used a systematic literature review guided by Ubuntu's conceptual framework to review the contribution of para-social workers in child protection concerning challenges, opportunities, and respective recommendations that are relevant to the African context and elsewhere in the World.

## BACKGROUND

Over time, Ubuntu practice of nurturing and protecting children was practiced across the African continent and has remained important to the welfare of the African community (Mabeyo et al, 2019). Colonial invasion on the African continent influenced the social, political, and economic aspects that impacted the existed traditional systems including child protection mechanisms (Spitzer, 2014). Colonial imposed social welfare system that was branded as a formal social welfare system while its counterparty (African traditional social welfare) was unheeded under the umbrella of an informal social welfare system (Marston, 2015). The so-called informal social welfare system even though it was side-lined, it continued to serve most in rural areas where there was little influence of colonial activities and was done locally without any

formal interventions by the state (Lembuka, 2021 & Makuu, 2017).

In reference to African Ubuntu, throughout the history of Tanzania the extended family and village are known for its contribution towards the care and support of OVC because most communities believe that a child should be raised by relatives (Lembuka, 2021 & 2023). Traditional social welfare practice was based on voluntary spirit of Ubuntu to care for orphans and vulnerable children within the natural environment of a child that enables children to grow up in a family environment and to retain ties with their extended family and community.

As indicated in the study by (United Nations Children Education Fund (2011) on 'children in informal alternative care' in Tanzania grandmothers were caring for, almost 50 per cent of orphaned children (Societas Socialis, 2012). However, the ability of the extended family to offer care and support to OVC today has been greatly undermined by the increased number of OVC due to HIV and AIDS and thereby creating a burden of care for the older people and children themselves (TACAIDS 2013).

Also, it was further reported that due to the effects of HIV and AIDS and the large numbers of orphaned children, financial and practical constraints mean that families and communities were less able to take on responsibility for children and provide for their basic needs (Guga, et al, 2012 & Makuu, 2017). The complex interactions of these social forces and limited resources available for governmental response affects effectiveness of programs to address vulnerable children's needs, compounded by challenges in integration of social service and medical infrastructures and inadequate work forces in terms numbers as well as education and professional opportunities (Linsk et al, 2010).

Children continued to face, stigma, physical and emotional displacement and infection were further harmed by limited economic opportunity and educational opportunities as well as by grief, loss and emotional traumas that accompany parental death and family displacement (Intra-health Tanzania, 2011 & SOS 2012).

The government of Tanzania through the Department of Social Welfare and The Institute of Social Work in collaboration with social welfare key stakeholders conducted assessments of the social welfare system in the country that necessitated the establishment of the Social Work Partnership for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (Bess, 2011). The partnership was initiated by among others, the American International Alliance (AIHA) HIV & AIDS Twinning centre, Tanzania's Institute of Social Work (ISW), Tanzania Association of Social Workers (TASWO) and Chicago-based JACSW/MATEC at the University of Illinois at Chicago (Intra-health Tanzania, 2011). The partnership took deliberate efforts under the guidance of the government of Tanzania to establish a community base voluntary cadre necessary for child protection at the grass root level (Bess, 2011).

Para social work represents African Ubuntu child protection mechanism where every community member is responsible for child protection at community level (Lembuka, 2021). This was a community-based cadre for social service workforce at micro level referred to as para-social workers, meaning that they are volunteers in nature, but are recognized as serving a critical link between the community-based, often informal system, and the more formal or statutory system (Andrews et al, 2017). Para social work cadre operates at village or *mtaa* level that reflects a typical African Ubuntu towards child protection in African community setting (Lembuka, 2024). It was argued by Mugumbate (2019) that "it takes a village to raise a child" which means that meaningful interactions among the child, family members, and those outside the family circle are necessary for children to realize human excellence (Mugumbate et al, 2019).

Interestingly, from this optic, para social work became relevant in African setting since community is responsible in protecting the rights and interests of a child thus all adults play a critical role to create the relational conditions that enable children to realize their personhood (Mugumbate, 2013). In African context, the ideal of social protection and development is envisioned in community where each member contribute for the welfare of others and respective cultural values bind the individuals, families, clans, leaders and knowledge holders (Lembuka, 2023b). According to Ubuntu model, children belong to the community and para social workers using community-focused approaches when working with children by taking into account community ecology when they do serve the children and their families (Mugumbate et al, 2013). The community has a role to play to protect children, for socialization and creating an identity (Mtetwa & Muchacha, 2017). This is strengthened by the Ubuntu belief that children become human beings through others.

To ensure professional standards and status of Ubuntu values in Tanzanian context, para social workers once deployed they worked under the supervision of other higher competent professionals either social workers or social welfare workers in line with the government social welfare workforce structure (TASWO, 2017). Para-professionals worked alongside professionals and their work makes vital contributions to the welfare and quality of life of vulnerable children and their families at the community (Twining, 2014). As community level child care workers, para social workers served in a variety of roles and carry out various functions for the best interests of children and their families (Intra-health Tanzania, 2011).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Ubuntu philosophical approach guided the review on the dimensions of Para-social work model toward child protection in Tanzania. As portrayed above by Mugumbate (2019) through an integrated framework of Ubuntu in social work with children where the essence of establishment of community-based cadre of para social work based on the above Ubuntu framework namely individual, family, communal, environment and spiritual (Mugumbate et al, 2019).

The review engaged various documents that were purposively selected, screened, and independently reviewed against predetermined criteria for eligibility (Schabram, 2010). The review was built based on 40 relevant documents with the study including published and unpublished articles, academic books, and reports from Tanzania and some parts of Africa. The review process began with the establishment of review objectives and their respective questions that were appropriate to justify the need for the review itself (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). The next step consisted of making decisions about the suitability of material to be considered in the review where efforts were made to be as comprehensive as possible to ensure that all relevant studies, published and unpublished relevant to the study were included in the review (Okoli, 2010).

Articles were searched from 2000 to 2024 using the search term 'para social work, African indigenous child protection and Ubuntu child protection' cross-referenced with up to 30 related terms, which were listed in the reference section of the this article. Eligible studies were those that analysed the contributions and impacts of indigenous models in Africa on child protection through health and social welfare systems at the community level (Jesson et al., 2011). The review considered screening for inclusion where necessary step that consisted of evaluating the applicability of the material identified in the preceding step and was screened to determine their relevance (Vom Brocke et al., 2009).

Finally, collected data were analysed, collate, summarize, aggregate, organize, and compare the evidence extracted from the included studies. The extracted data was presented in a meaningful way that suggests a new contribution to the existing literature and knowledge on a given topic thus; conclusions were based on this all-inclusive knowledge base (Watson & Webster (2002).

Based on Ecological approach is key component of Ubuntu framework thus para social workers engage it in child protection to realize children rights in their natural setting (Lembuka, 2023). Either tangible or non-tangible right that needs to attain necessary to address children's vulnerability, para social workers focus with the interaction and interdependence of children with their surrounding systems (Links et al, 2010). Also, para social workers take a holistic view by assessing how children affect and are affected by such physical, social, political, and cultural systems (Bess, 2011).

Application of Ubuntu framework in this review supported the linkage child protection entails holistic and collective approach where individual, family, environment, and spirit are all responsible for safety, security, identity, morality, belongingness, humanity, welfare and development of children at the community level (Mugumbate et al, 2019). In African context, a child is a product of a community that forms an ecological basis of community thus the human community is considered as an ecological framework for child protection (Mabeyo et al, 2019).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The review has shown that until now, there has been no agreed upon and recognized definition for paraprofessional social service workers at either the global or national level. This is especially true within the African context, where a range of different kinds of paraprofessionals have rapidly been trained and deployed to fill existing gaps of professional social service workers (TASWO, 2015 & Lembuka, 2021).

In the Tanzanian context, a para-social worker (PSW) is a volunteer voted by the community members and then recruited for special training to assist in the delivery of foundational social welfare services at community level, among other tasks, para social workers offer psycho-social support and primarily refers clients to needed services within the community (DSW, 2012 & TASWO, 2015). Para social workers work under the supervision of formal social welfare system including social welfare officers, ward executive officers and village executive officers etc. (Links et al, 2017).

When the government of Tanzania in collaboration with key child care stakeholders thought to revive a sort of voluntary and community owned child protection cadre, at the end they came up with para social -work model to boost up child protection at the grass root level (Twining Centre, 2014). These community-based volunteer workers were named para social workers thus representing a formal and informal Ubuntu model with very limited social work competence to serve vulnerable children and their families in the country (Lembuka, 2021).

Para social workers were recruited, trained with basic social work skills and deployed at community level (street or village) and their competence based on outreach and identification, engagement of orphans and families, assessing needs and strengths, developing a plan of care, networking and identifying and referral to other resources, providing support and services within the context of the organization, and ongoing case management, advocacy, and follow-up (TASWO, 2015). For the case of Tanzania, the specific roles of para social workers included helping HIV affected orphans and vulnerable children, counselling MVC and their families, developing support structures for MVC and their families (Linsk et al, 2017).

Literature shows that para social workers with community strength-based approach were successful in improving communication with individuals, families, and other workers within their unique cultural context mostly through using local customs and language (Twining, 2014). The cultural competence they possess from their own community made it easier to understand the community and being accepted by their own community rather than being deployed from other communities (GSSWA, 2017).

The additional advantage of PSW cadre is their capacity to understand ethical values and cultural practices of the local community where they do serve and used this understanding to facilitate effective, gender-sensitive

communication with children, adolescents, and adults (Makuu, 2017). They provided protection and safety needs to families and other caregivers for the sake of vulnerable populations served (e.g., children) using simple and non-judgmental language and asking for feedback to assure understanding. They used clear, non-judgmental methods of communication, such as basic active/empathic listening and responding, to engage and build relationships with clients (e.g., children, their families, other vulnerable populations) (TASWO, 2015).

The review also showed that among the key roles of para social workers was to develop a community map that identifies child populations and their potential risk factors at community level or other vulnerable populations at risk, assess needs and strengths and develop a service plan including direct support but may also include coordination of services and resources where they exist or can be brokered (Twinning, 2014). For example, over the course of time para social work program in Tanzania was able to establish para social work network (PASONET) through its headquarters in Dodoma Capital City to coordinate and advocate for para-social work activities across the country (Intra-health Tanzania, 2011). Since para social workers served at the grassroots level their service was visible as the program has raised awareness of social service issues and the need in the country for these services in government.

With basic social work skills, para social workers have been voluntarily participating in the development of basic service plans for vulnerable children. These plans involve clients and families in decision-making regarding a plan of action to address needs, develop a recommended service plan with recommended actions and/or support, and identify specific country local government bodies for the provision of services at the local level, manage emergency cases, provides referrals to other service providers (Mbise et al, 2015).

Over short period of time, para social work cadre improved the lives of vulnerable children across the country and this was observed through Ministry officials who cited the activities performed that increased understanding of what social welfare and the social work profession is, and this facilitated the establishment of a social welfare strategy and an increase in budget (central and districts) for social welfare issues. The government-led social welfare assistant cadre grew out of this effort (Linsk et al, 2012).

Para social workers increased general community awareness on gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against children (VAC) through promoting community awareness of domestic, gender-based, and family violence and child exploitation issues. This enabled the community to work together towards the prevention of domestic and family violence, child abuse or any other form of exploitation.

PSW ensured identification and services for children and families at risk of family violence, child abuse, or exploitation (TASWO, 2015). Moreover, para social workers utilise an opportunity to participate in the existing

formal child protection system and integrate in a multi-disciplinary team, keeping the well-being and best interests of the child/youth in the forefront of the discussions (Twinning, 2014).

Despite of the various achievements brought by para social workers' intervention in Tanzania the PSW program faced several challenges in its implementation. These challenges ranged from institutional, competence, financial and conflicts of interests among the key stakeholders etc. Tanzania, like the rest of African countries south of Sahara has continue to engage stakeholders in delivering social welfare services and thus a country has incorporated several communities based, faith based, and internationally based non-governmental organizations to serve children and other vulnerable populations (Laura et al, 2010).

On the other hand, some of the stakeholders have continued to establish new forms of paraprofessional cadres that have the same or similar roles of para-social workers at community level. They work to varying degrees with community service networks as well as with municipal and regional government structures that affected the functioning of para social work (TASWO, 2017).

Funders, partners, participants, and educators have diverse and sometimes challenging expectations that influence para-social work programs towards serving vulnerable children at various settings (Links, et al, 2010). This posed a serious challenge to the effectiveness of the service delivery at the community level while on the other hand, it facilitates conflicts of interest to arise and the implications of increased reporting of child maltreatment for the response of the formal child protection system (Laura et al, 2010 & Driscroll 2020).

Most of the PSWs are in rural areas where shortages of stationary for reporting became challenging and this affected the reporting mechanism of cases at hand (Links et al, 2012). Poor reporting tools like forms as PSWs use forms to report on the number of MVCs who have been supported and what services were provided (Driscroll, 2020). After the form is filled, they go to the supervisors, the district social welfare officers, the regional social welfare officer, the PMORALG, and The Department of Social Welfare (TASWO, 2015). Training on the tools has been instituted with PSWs and supervisors; however, PSWs report not having enough forms or access to photocopy machines; not having transport to deliver forms to supervisors at the ward level; and not having clarity on deadlines to ensure data is being submitted promptly (AIHA, 2014).

Since para-social workers are volunteering in nature, the program experienced a daily drop out of PSW as some changed their locality, others moved to urban areas searching for green pastures and others joined the newly introduced community-based paraprofessional program. The need was to track those trained as they move out of the PSW roles (Intra-health Tanzania, 2011). If they continue to provide services in other roles, such as social welfare assistants, or by transfer to different districts, or if they seek



further education in the field, this would not be seen as a loss but rather as career growth (Mbise et al, 2014& TASWO, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

Child protection is global agenda but in developing countries like Tanzania the situation is not promising following the contradiction of the proper and sustainable child protection mechanism. Indigenous child protection systems have been sidelined by colonial legacy in the country Tanzania and the efforts to restore them is compromised by change of policy and globalization. Emerging of socio-economic forces have caused family separation, street children, orphans, family dysfunction etc. On the similar course, the so called formal social welfare system couldn't afford child care and children continued to be more vulnerable.

Selection of Ujamaa model in post-colonial Tanzania between 1967 and 1995 was a relevant policy for child protection in the country. Globalization and related impacts are the major forces that have hampered Ubuntu models for child protection and social welfare in the country. The complex interactions of these forces and limited resources available for governmental response affect effectiveness of programs to address vulnerable children's needs, compounded by challenges in the integration of social service and medical infrastructures and inadequate work forces in terms numbers as well as education and professional opportunities (Linsk et al, 2010).

To address the challenge, Para-social work model was designed in a mixture of formal social work and Ujamaa competence in the country relevant for African cultural values and ecology. Para-social work model proved the capacity of indigenous models in addressing child vulnerability and most important it can work with existing formal and informal structures. Available literature reveals that children should grow in a family environment or extended family (which provides permanent care) that represent their indigenous setting rather than institutionalization. This is reflected on African Ubuntu model of child protection so as para social work program that embraces ecological approach to child protection which seeks to understand the interaction between children, families and indigenous communities, and their impact on the wellbeing of the child.

Social workers, child care workers and other key stakeholders on child protection should revisit indigenous models like Para-social work relevant for child protection in African context. In comparison with other imported child protection program in the country, para social work model proved to be cost effective and sustainable model with capacity engage in creative and innovative thinking to pro-actively address the challenges in their immediate working environment in serving vulnerable children in their families or natural communities.

Donors related programs are competing in investing on child protection that introduced other models of child

protection in the country as a result have posed challenge to the capacity of para-social work for the past 6 years. It's the right time for the government and policy makers to revisit the capacity of para-social work model in improving the child welfare. Moreover, para-social work model should be strategized in policy framework and government plans, PDW model needs to receive recognition by their peers, social welfare workforce, civil society, NGOs etc.

Doubtless, para-social work cadre has provided evidence based indigenous intervention relevant for African context and how Ubuntu models can be combined with modern social welfare approaches to promote the welfare and quality of life. Despite of inadequate resources yet the government of Tanzania based on Ujamaa spirit it continues to embrace the Ubuntu values of collective efforts on care, cohesiveness, and volunteerism spirit in serving those most vulnerable children. To compliment this, the government should ensure that all child protection programs that are donors funded must integrate indigenous model like para social work that links between formal and informal social welfare system particularly at community level

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