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**The Western Models Don't Work Here
Co-design and Co-production: Social work in community development with
indigenous village communities in Sierra Leone**

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Abstract

The article is based on a workshop presentation at the IFSW (International Federation of Social Workers) World Conference in July 2020. It describes joint work between two social workers, one in Sierra Leone, the other in Scotland sharing skills, knowledge and expertise across continents. The UNCRC is unequivocal that the best place for children to be brought up is in their family. Our work is based on the reality that in social work we meet and work with many families who are separated. We started talking about how we worked in reuniting families after separation that has lasted several years. In the case of Sierra Leone during and in the aftermath of a ten-year civil war. In Scotland we examined what happens when the state, through social workers, have looked after children when their families have not been able to meet their needs. The African proverb 'it takes a whole village to bring up a child', encompasses the indigenous culture and philosophy of ubuntu, our interdependence with each other. This contrasts with the western style of social work that concentrates on the individual. We discovered a paradox which led to the vision that we might be able together to create a new social work paradigm built on our collective knowledge in working towards prevention of family separation. Co-building social protection with our communities is key to this next phase. It is one step in putting into practice the important resource of indigenous knowledge into our work, as promoted in the revised International Definition of Social Work in 2014.

Keywords: social protection, indigenous knowledge, Sierra Leone, family separation, social work practice

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Batı Modelleri Burada Çalışmıyor Ortak tasarım ve ortak üretim: Sierra Leone'deki yerel köy topluluklarıyla topluluk geliştirmede sosyal hizmet

Öz

Bu çalışma, Temmuz 2020'de IFSW (Uluslararası Sosyal Hizmet Uzmanları Federasyonu) Dünya Konferansı'ndaki bir atölye sunumuna dayanmaktadır. Biri Sierra Leone'de, diğeri İskoçya'da olmak üzere iki sosyal hizmet uzmanı arasındaki ortak çalışmayı kıtalar arasında beceri, bilgi ve uzmanlık paylaşımını anlatmaktadır. UNCRC (Birleşmiş Milletler Çocuk Hakları Antlaşması), çocukların yetiştirilmesi için en iyi yerin aileleri olduğu konusunda kesin. Çalışmalarımız, sosyal hizmette birbirinden ayrılmış birçok aileyle tanıştığımız ve çalıştığımız gerçeğine dayanmaktadır. Sierra Leone'de, on yıllık bir iç savaş sırasında ve sonrasında yıllarca süren ayrılıktan sonra aileleri yeniden birleştirmek için nasıl çalıştığımız hakkında konuşmaya başladık. İskoçya'da, aileleri ihtiyaçlarını karşılayamayan çocuklara sosyal hizmet uzmanları aracılığıyla devlet baktığı zaman neler olduğunu inceledik. Bir Afrika atasözü 'bir çocuğu büyütmek bütün bir köy gerektirir', der. Bu atasözü yerli kültürü ve ubuntu felsefesini, birbirimize olan bağımlılığımızı anlatmaktadır. Bu anlayış ise bireye odaklanan Batı tarzı sosyal hizmet ile tezat oluşturmaktadır. Ailelerin ayrılığının önlenmesine yönelik çalışma konusundaki kolektif bilgimiz üzerine inşa edilmiş yeni bir sosyal hizmet paradigması yaratabileceğimize ilişkin bir paradoks keşfettik. Sosyal korumayı topluluklarımızla birlikte inşa etmek, bu aşamanın anahtarıdır. Bu çalışma, 2014 yılında gözden geçirilen Uluslararası Sosyal Hizmet Tanımında da vurgulandığı gibi, yerel bilgiyi çalışmalarımızda uygulamaya başlamanın bir adımıdır.

Anahtar kelimeler: sosyal koruma, yerel bilgi, Sierra Leone, aile ayrılığı, sosyal hizmet uygulaması

Introduction

Acknowledgments: The co-building of this paradigm would not have been possible without the opportunity IFSW offers in working together across national boundaries to invest in global social work knowledge and expertise. In this episode of global learning it started when Sierra Leone social workers joined IFSW in 2017, bringing with them an enormous body of knowledge not readily available beyond their national borders, but with a reflection and challenge that ‘western social work does not work here’. The practical support to help spread our shared learning came in 2019 with a grant from the International Development Fund of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) that enabled Ruth Stark to join George Mansaray and his team working in the Ruth Stark’s Hope Kindergarten in the north west of Sierra Leone - and Abie Mansaray, a young person with lived experience. Together we made a keynote presentation at the IFSW African Regional Conference in Uganda in October 2019. The detail of the work will be published by IFSW in an e-book in November 2020.

The background: Conflict, separation, families and communities

When two social workers get together to talk about what they do we use stories. Storytelling is an important part of shared learning and a place to pursue ethical dilemmas. Two children separated from their families in two different continents, but with a commonality of need for love and roots in which to embed their identity, growth and development to become in turn loving, caring adults are shared:

Fatou

Fatou was born in Sierra Leone at the end of the civil war. Her father was killed, and her mother struggled to provide for her daughter in the devastated village in which she and her extended family lived. Like other women in the village her mother tried to return their land to growing crops that they could take into the town to sell. The land was in poor condition after the war. Farming is still done with hand tools, there is no power to run machines. She worked many hours in the field, carrying water to help the crops grow - but their poverty increased. She left her young child with her mother to find work in the city to support the family in the village. This worked well for three years. Then Fatou’s grandmother died. Her aunt took her niece into her home, but the stress of another child in the already overcrowded household and the increasing poverty built stress, tension and eventually conflict. Violence erupted and some of this was directed towards the four-year-old Fatou, all unbeknown to her mother in the distant city. In a country where there is virtually no infrastructure keeping in contact with family becomes intermittent, fragile and can disappear.

A social worker comes across a silent, isolated small person and gradually through skills in listening, communication through play and patience, a relationship is developed where she tells the social worker about her life. She describes the love of her mother, then her grandmother, but now recounts the pain and fear of living with her aunt. The social worker resolves to find the mother. He tracks her down and visits her in the city. She is in a new relationship and has another child. In listening to and working with the

social worker the mother and daughter are reunited after a separation of 6 years. They have much to learn about each other and how they come together as a family, but it is done and the young person grows into a young adult, now in higher education; but Fatou keeps a special place for that social worker who helped her and her family reunite after a long separation.

Sean

Sean is the oldest of three children. He lives in Scotland. He has shielded his younger brother and sister from the domestic violence and drug addiction of his parents. When from time to time he felt he had to escape what happened at home he cycled to his grandparents, just down the road, where he found a warm restorative welcome. They do not know the full extent of the violence within that household, that secret is kept behind closed doors. Eventually the parents split up. His father is imprisoned for drug offences. His mother, still addicted, is homeless but manages with the help of her sister to keep the two youngest children with her, whilst her eldest son goes to stay with the grandparents.

The grandparents have their own issues of ill-health and family bereavements that impact on their emotional availability for their grandson. In his increasing isolation he becomes hurt, distressed and he acts out angrily at doors and furniture round and about him – he feels he is becoming out of control, as do those near him. He is taken into public care and placed with foster carers. Their kindness to him provides mutual fulfilment. Their need to care and his to be looked after. Sean has been with them for 6 months and the social workers and carers assess that things are so settled that they should make this a permanent placement.

In the meantime, the mother has conquered her drug addiction. She is no longer in a violent relationship and she is providing really good care for her two youngest children. She has a new home and has paid her debts. Her relationships with her extended family are restored after years of difficulty.

When Sean, his mother, his brother and sister are told about the plans that he should stay with his foster carers they are stunned into acquiescence. They feel powerless against the system and the recommendation. Sean becomes distressed again, but he does not trust anyone enough to talk about how he feels. His behaviour deteriorates, again he ‘acts out’ his emotional distress. This results in the breakdown of the placement. The immediate reaction of the adults is that there is something ‘pathologically’ wrong with the boy. He finds himself in an ‘emergency foster care’ placement. The couple are older, they provide space and listen to him. The system stops still for a time and he begins to find people he can trust. Simply asking what are the 3 things that he wants to change reveals top of his list is to go back and live with his mum, brother and sister. Talking to his brother and sister they want him home. They do not know why this older brother, who protected them when they were younger, is not living with them. Plans are changed and Sean is now back with his family.

It is from these stories that we began to think about different approaches to helping families negotiate traumatic change in their lives. With different cultural and legal systems, different bodies of research that

help develop policy and practice we realised that the outcomes for people can be so different, depending where in the world we live.

Can we as a global profession justify these different outcomes based on national and regional variations? We have internationally agreed conventions, like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), that have set global standards for the care and development of people through childhood to adulthood. These standards are rooted in the opening of the UN Charter. The significance as we see it in reminding ourselves of the actual words is that it sets a framework for the interrelationship between civil society, *we the peoples*..... and our collective national governments.

We the Peoples Of The United Nations Determined

to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and

to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and

to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and

to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

And for These Ends

to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours, and

to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and

to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and

to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples,

Have Resolved to Combine Our Efforts To Accomplish These Aims

Accordingly, our respective Governments, through representatives assembled in the city of San Francisco, who have exhibited their full powers found to be in good and due form, have agreed to the present Charter of the United Nations and do hereby establish an international organization to be known as the United Nations.

It is in this context that we offer our deliberations for your consideration and to ask you, from your own perspective how you can help us develop our paradigms of practice in our global social work profession.

Understanding the issues in Sierra Leone, Scotland and care experienced people

Many countries experience war; social workers around the world are heavily involved in helping communities rebuild in the aftermath of trauma, grief and loss. For numerous people fear is something they have lived with for years, a natural and normal reaction to the abuse of power and control. Trust in each other is often exceptionally low or non-existent. Reuniting children with their families after 11 years of civil war was the beginning of the work that brought the authors together through internet conversations enabled through IFSW membership.

The children had been taken or made their way to different parts of the country or neighboring countries, sometimes by force, sometimes fleeing for safety.

When the war was over farmlands had been devastated and people's livelihoods had been destroyed. Families and communities were, and still are, in poverty recovering from war and exploitation. They have little faith in NGO or Government help that heavily invest in an aid model rather than social transformation. In contrast the communities that children are being returned to seek to create sustainable inclusive development.

In Scotland there were 14,738 children in care in Scotland in 2018. The children and young people are in a variety of placements, foster homes, young people's units for older children. This represents 2% of our Scottish children who are separated each year from their families by the state with the sanction of the judicial system. Through public policy processes if they are separated for more than 6 months it is highly unlikely that the children will return to their birth families. The majority live in someone else's family.

Even when circumstances have changed in the birth family for the better, if the separation is longer than 6 months it becomes extremely difficult, because of legal actions taken by the state in courts of law, for families to be reunited. Contact is discouraged, to protect stability on the alternative family situation. The research data on which this decision making is based is often old and has rarely considered the voice of experts through their lived experience.

Reality TV shows abound in the western cultures as people in their 40's, 50's and older reunite with siblings and parents separated by adoption, fostering or the care system in general. Margaret Humphries in her book *Empty Cradles* (1994) exposed the horrors of the forced migration of children from the UK through schemes run by Dr Barnardo's and the Drake Fellowship as late as the 1970s.

Care experienced people, those who have lived the whole or part of their lives separated from their birth family, around the world are finding their voice. They seek to explain to policy makers and practitioners that the long-term effects of interventions in their lives need more in-depth research and understanding. Their lived experience tells us that we have a lot to learn about how some of our responses to crisis can be short sighted in terms of the entirety of a person's life and damaging to a person's identity and ability to make and sustain relationships.

The campaigning by *Who Cares? Scotland* has recently brought about a change in the law in Scotland to restrict the separation of brothers and sisters who are in public care. This is just a first step. They continue to campaign for a fundamental change in how the state intervenes in their lives. For more detailed evidence of what needs to change please refer to some of the examples in *The Importance of Human Relationships* (Stark, 2019) For further information on national movements websites like <https://www.whocarescotland.org/> and <https://voyce.org.nz/> . They, and other similar organizations are working together to create a global family and voice for care experienced people. Suffice it to say that from the experts through experience we have not got this right in the west.

From this triangle of discussion, we present a paradox.

The Paradox

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the Preamble states the premise that the best place for a child to grow and develop into adults is within their family.

Convinced that the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community,
Recognizing that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding,
Considering that the child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society, and brought up in the spirit of the ideals proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, and in particular in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity,

In Sierra Leone we are reuniting families after years of separation; in the west, research driven practice separates families often permanently after 6 months of separation –

How can we as social workers, involved in social protection, have two such contradictory practices? Where is the evidence that can help us decide when either practice is in the child's best interest (Article 3, UNCRC)?

From this paradox we anticipate that we may be able to work towards a new paradigm in social work practice that will help us reach our vision of better shared futures for everyone, reinforced by the SGD vision that no one will be left behind.

Building the Philosophical Framework

Language: understanding some cultural concepts

As we develop our global knowledge of social work we often use the same words that have subtle or divergent interpretation in different countries and cultures. Words can be powerful, and it is important that we use our words carefully, mindful that they can be dogmatic and oppressive as well as helpful and insightful. As we explore each other's language some concepts become clearer and we believe worth sharing and reflecting on how they can shape our practice.

These are some of the words that we have helped shape our thinking and communication with the partners we work with co-building change

Hope

Hope is word found right across Africa in the titles of organisations that are grown by and within communities. An example is the Hope Training Centre in Nakivale Settlement, the oldest refugee camp in Uganda, with their shared vision:

Hope is the poetry of our dream, and action is the builder of our reality.

Ubuntu

Ubuntu can be described as a way of thinking about what it means to be human, and how we, as humans, should behave towards others.

“My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours.”
Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Sisu

A Finnish concept where barriers, like trauma, are transposed into the adventure of travelling through a new frontier. It describes how people leave victimhood and become actively involved in life again.

The African Kindergarten

it takes a whole village to bring up a child - Kindergartens are synonymous in the west with pre-school education. Here it is reinterpreted to encompass the African proverb. It is the garden that nurtures the child into adulthood and citizenship

Fambul tok

Fambul Tok is rooted in the understanding that reconciliation is a process and not a one-time event. It works with communities on a long-term basis. It ensures full community engagement—through initial consultations to determine whether people are ready to reconcile, and subsequently through community-led preparations and outreach for Fambul Tok ceremonies. <https://fambultok.org/>

Citizen Leadership

In 2006 this term was used in Scotland as part of a Review of Social Work Services (Changing Lives) to describe the role of people who are experts through their lived experience as stakeholders. It replaces ‘service user’ a term that perpetuates the ‘status quo’. The term was intended to recognise the importance of their power, responsibility, and influence in the development of social work. A vision yet to be achieved, mainly due to lack of investment in the powerful resource of people.

The Global Agenda



Figure 1. Global Agenda

The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development has guided our exploration in the social work community of different ways of working. From the first ten years we have read the evidence that was collated in the development of the four themes. The first three themes gathered evidence on issues.

The final theme builds the bridge to the next generation of themes, concentrating on the importance of how human relationships form the core of social work practice in social development.

This has now been followed by the themes developed during the IFSW World Conference in 2020, for the Global Agenda 2020-2030. They are about action and how we focus our work on co-building social transformation for our joint futures.

- Valuing Social Work as an Essential Service
 - Realising the essential role of the social work profession to connect people, communities and systems, to co-build sustainable communities and to contribute to liveable futures
 - Resourcing the profession with legal recognition, respectful working conditions, education and continuing professional development and supporting professional associations.
- Co-building Inclusive Social Transformation
 - Co-building with people, families, communities, social movements and governments to achieve inclusive social transformation locally, nationally, regionally and globally.
 - Promoting participatory democracy, gender equality, action to address racism, economic sustainability and climate justice.
- Ubuntu: 'I am because we are'
 - Nurturing relationships are central to the social work profession in all aspects of our work.
 - Promoting indigenous knowledge and the decolonisation of the social work profession.
- Transforming Social Protections Systems
 - Transforming social protections systems to secure the human dignity and rights of all peoples.
 - Strengthening connections for security and change. Promoting harmony in relationships and a way of living between peoples, communities and mother earth.
- Promoting Diversity and the Power of Joint Social Action
 - Celebrating the strengths of all people and their active role in leading social development.
 - Working together to co-design and co-build thriving communities and societies for people and the environment.

We see a correlation between the work that we are doing within this holistic Global Agenda and the achievement of the SDGs. Our joint aim is to make sure no-one is left behind. The core elements are the vision, the aim to create peaceful communities that are sustainable and that a key component will be the

co-building of trust where this has been damaged as a result of conflict. Together we can co-build social transformation.

Some practical challenges

Sierra Leone

The fifth poorest country in the world, Salone has 7 million people. Many people live in small rural communities where the main form of livelihood is farming and fishing. Mining has periodically been a source of international trade, favouring the foreign investors. When they leave, often due to the sudden end of government contracts, the local communities have been left devastated. It is subsistence living at best.

The country is still in recovery from the 10-year civil war with a weak government that has been unable to develop core infrastructure in health and social protection, with roads to link communities or fresh water essential for life and healthy living. Climate change has resulted in severe flooding interspersed with a dry season that is getting drier as the years go by, hindering sustainable development. Ebola, Malaria, HIV/AIDS, COVID19 are challenges for the communities.

Traditional medicine can be effective and is affordable. There is a political policy to create a partnership between traditional and western medicine to develop appropriate resources in an emerging under-resourced health system. A similar approach is being developed in social protection with indigenous and western social work practice learning from each other, as in this current working collaboration.

The Ruth Stark Hope Kindergarten was set up through a collective of social workers reuniting families who had been separated during the war. In the first year 383 children were reunited with their families. The families were already experiencing poverty and food insecurity in areas of no interest to NGOs and politicians. The social workers knew that for successful family reunification the families needed support in rebuilding their lives. They used their indigenous knowledge and worked with the traditional village structures, trusted by the communities. The engagement and motivation of the Chiefs and Elders in their community development has been the cornerstone of developing community plans with everyone in the village to create their kindergartens, their nurturing environments, for the children.

The principle of 'it takes a whole village to bring up a child' helped shape the building up of social and child protection as a community responsibility. This is quite different from the western models that concentrate on the individual and responses to negative behaviour. Here the action is proactive, engaging the whole community in providing love and care that prevents harm.

Building that community responsibility allows for the next stage of communities fixing their priorities. Co-design and co-production are essential in developing plans to transform lives. Realistically power for change lies with the people. The communities invest in education and their priority was, and still is, rebuilding village schools for primary education. They are moving onto secondary education and now

want to invest in technical colleges with apprenticeships for young people as they build and maintain their own infrastructure, solar panels, fresh water, sanitation, e-learning in their schools, mechanising agriculture and much more. They have their visions and together with social workers and other partners they are embarking on a journey of change.

But it is not easy. Once a new school was built or an old one restored there was some government money for a teacher, but not enough, and nothing much for maintenance of the buildings or provision of up to date books, papers or pencils. The community engagement needs to be tended and nurtured for sustainability.

All this is essential to building local economies but there is another layer on the journey and this is where social workers move from working with the community to working with people dealing with their pain of trauma, the result of events in their lives that often appear as the barriers to moving from being in the state of a victim of abuse and oppression to finding a new energy for life. This is the area where indigenous and western social work come closer together.

Members of the community have been affected by some of the forced changes around them from external sources. For example, war and climate change have resulted in a revolution of demography. Polygamy in Sierra Leone has created extensive family structures. With increased poverty this has resulted in families of ten people sharing a 10x10 foot room. War has been followed by adults leaving their communities to find work, often leaving dependents behind. This has significantly increased the number of female-led households. The young outnumber the old. People both as individuals and as community members may need time and support in adjusting to these changes.

Alongside demographic change other issues have impacted on individuals. Female genital mutilation (FGM) is outlawed for girls under the age of 18, but the practice continues. Gender based violence is a part of many women's lives. Teenage pregnancy has received specific attention by many NGOs. The communities talk about how they feel about being over-researched by NGOs seeking funding for short term interventions that fail to impact on the issues. These communities are now seeking different solutions for rising out of poverty.

Traditionally conflict resolution is undertaken by the Chiefs and Elders through mediation. This is where the process of *Fambul tok* originates. As in the west, where rapists face a legal system and prison, the different ways that communities seek to address social justice fail to help the victim through the trauma of flashbacks, lack of self-esteem and fear. We have struggled to find any system that has been able to really address this issue as we listen to the experts through experience who live with the trauma. Here we need their *Citizen Leadership* to co-develop paths through *sisu*. Together we want to find a way through this trauma. In our discussions in Sierra Leone with women's groups peer support is seen as critical in helping people to move through that process of *sisu* – finding a way through the barrier. This led to discussion on how people get into these abusive relationships, how to get rid of the abuse of power and control between

people and how to use the social worker's knowledge and expertise in human relationships as part of that process.

The communities see the way forward with women's groups, often based on the former groups who were engaged in FGM, who are finding new ways to support themselves and their children. Working with the women's groups, particularly the women who were the 'cutters' revealed that they supported the elimination of FGM but wanted to retain the supportive element of the traditions to prepare girls for adulthood. They see part of the process of change creating new income streams to lift them out of poverty and despair. With new internal strength they believe they can together help educate their menfolk that violence towards women is not acceptable. They wanted to learn how to develop their businesses. To this end they are planning peer led women's centers in each village, near the health centers, to support themselves and their children through the recovery from the trauma of violence, domestic abuse and rape.

War has increased the number of people with a disability in the community. Amputation of limbs was common in the war. Disabled people have been particularly targeted with discrimination and marginalisation. In the co-building of the community plans this needed to be dealt with. This was done by ensuring the assets of the disabled were recognised and cherished. In one community meeting it emerged that the disabled group had done a census of all the people with disability and their assets. Their skill was recognised, and the community asked them to do a census of all the village. The speed and accuracy of fulfilling their task and laying the information before the community has been an essential element in the community co-design and co-coproduction of their community plan. It was completed within two weeks and the group became co-leaders in the community development plans. Communities create inclusion, not individuals or social workers, though they might be a catalyst that helps that change happen!

Developing ideas about how change might happen is part of the innovation and creativity needed in social work anywhere in the world. Some of the developments that have been tried by international aid agencies like fresh water pumps, solar panels, health centers in times of endemics like Ebola and HIV/AIDS, have not been sustained because there has been no investment in training local people in the maintenance of these projects. This has caused anger in the communities. But everyone seems to have a cell phone. Young people charge them by small solar panels in the school playground. This developed a discussion within the community about how to develop solar panels for power - this would enable for example - light for the houses after 6pm, power for the fishing boats to fish beyond the polluted waters, to provide energy for e-books for learning for children and young people where libraries are devoid of books, to provide power for agricultural tools... all now part of the community plan. At the same time this would respect the environment and the challenge of climate change.

Focusing on how change can happen in an area where transport is by dugout canoe, motor bike or walking, where isolated villages are by-passed by governments and NGOs, can seem daunting - but the strength and dignity of the people is the greatest asset in the co-design and co-production of their

community plan for transformational change, led by the chiefs and key stakeholders in the community. They offer us as social workers a reflection on the importance of holistic thinking and a working together for change.

Scotland

The Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 was the first ‘social work’ legislation in the world. It had a vision that prevention was better than cure and gave a duty to local municipalities to promote social welfare in their communities. It revolutionised the juvenile court system, replacing it with community led Children’s Hearings where ‘need’ was prioritised over ‘deed’. It incorporated all the social work services from the cradle to the grave. Social workers were trained generically with a belief that skills, knowledge and expertise were transferable between different situations. Over time this vision was diluted and changed by different political interventions that recreated silos in social work policy and practice. Gradually policy and practice moved from the community base to specialisms and concentration on the individual.

The changes were influenced by several factors. Underinvestment in social work was just one of the issues, one that many colleagues around the world will recognise. A series of child deaths in the UK, where social workers ‘failed’ to protect vulnerable children, were the subject of mass media coverage during public enquiries, set up by politicians that fueled a blame culture. This led increasingly to risk averse practice and demands for ‘specialists’ in child protection. Some of the research done in the 1970’s on small groups of children who were in care homes highlighted ‘drift’ in planning. This led to a new wave of adoption of older children, in the wake of fewer babies being available following the legalisation of abortion. Later came the demographic explosion of a rapidly burgeoning elderly population and its demands on the health care system. In short, the political influence in how social policies developed has had an increasingly adverse effect on the vision for social work in Scotland laid out in 1968. More and more social work services are being pushed in the direction of social administration and social engineering. The family has been slit up in social work practice into individuals with individual needs rather than an interrelated community with interlinking supports for sustainable family life – as envisaged in the UNCRC or Art 8 ECHR – respect for family life.

The net result for children and families is that a child in public care in Scotland for longer than 6 months is now highly likely to be subject to long term care plans that do not include a return to their birth families. The voice of care experience is telling us that this social engineering is not good for the young people at the heart of this policy. This is in sharp contrast to the work in Sierra Leone and other places around the world, or the evidence from people like Margaret Humphries. This is explored in more depth in our earlier book on human relationships (Stark, 2019).

Conclusion

Children separated from their families was the starting point for our discussion that brought us together across continents. It is an issue faced by many families and social workers across the globe, in many

different circumstances, too often this is in contravention of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Let us return to what the members of the UN have stated in the preamble that

Considering that the child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society, and brought up in the spirit of the ideals proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, and in particular in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity,

They have declared that preparing our children to take their part in our sustainable inclusive communities is our civil and state responsibility and should be done in their families. We are given instruction through the articles of the convention that we should only disturb this norm when there is serious risk of harm or abuse. Furthermore Article 18 states:

For the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.

If we, as social workers, want to make a difference in our communities, strengthening families and communities to provide that protected safe garden for growth is where we should focus. So much of western social work is directed towards the vulnerability of the individual, identifying deficiency rather than supporting strength and nurturing growth. It is risk averse and often it over emphasises deficiency creating labels - that push people into silos - that become oppressive. It strays into social engineering rather than social protection. Those silos might include child protection, mental health, criminal justice or disability, to name but a few. They often ignore the interrelationship of different aspects of each person and how each person interacts and responds to their community. It is our suggestion that western social work could learn from the Ubuntu that is so important in indigenous social work in supporting positive change.

We propose a paradigm shift in philosophical focus that might help us address the paradox outlined at the beginning of this article, learning from current practice in western and indigenous communities. We do not often address the philosophy or anthropology of social work. Some investigations that were traditionally part of philosophy have become separate academic disciplines, including psychology, sociology, linguistics, and economics. Should we now start thinking about social work putting all these elements back together in a holistic perspective - the Ubuntu of academic disciplines!

Building community capacity to create social protection is key to our proposed paradigm. In this there is space for the individual, but it has perspective that includes the complex matrixes in which we all live.

Can the paradigm shift to create new models of global practice? The geopolitical axis is changing. The dominance of the global north is shifting south and east to Asia and Africa. The national and regional responses to COVID 19 have put the foot on the accelerator in how this shift is happening. This includes

changing dialogues between civil society and their governments. Economic and cultural changes are on the way and as people who work with people through change there is a role for social workers in assisting these social developments.

The vision for our shared futures is set out in the Global Agenda themes for 2020-2030. We know that for people to engage in sustainable change it emerges from the ground up, with strengthening roots below the surface. The availability of hope and trust are the nutrients in the soil, with the sun and water providing energy for transformation from seed to fruition. We know that trauma can be a barrier to people being able to engage in change and can interrupt development. That barrier of trauma can be crossed through *sisu*. Essential to making the dream a reality is the energy of co-design and co-production as we together tend our kindergarten for our children and families to create inclusive, sustainable joint futures.

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