Center for Social Development

Under-utilized Contributions by International Students

Case Study for Education and Research

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International social work education in the United States focuses on globalization and international practicum for American students. A readily available resource, international social work graduate students, is rarely utilized. This article discusses a case study of five African students who engage in a process of realigning their academic knowledge to respond to local social development challenges in their home countries. These processes result in profound innovations that are based on theory, indigenous experience, and culturally competent practice.

Key words: *AssetsAfrica, asset building, social work education, international, transnational, Africa*

International social work education in the United States has long focused on how American students and the social work curriculum in the United States can expand its horizon to become more international in focus (Healy, 1995; Midgley, 2001). There is an acknowledgement of the importance of international social work in the profession, and many schools are beginning to incorporate international content into their curriculum (Healy, 1995; Midgley, 2001). The discussion is typically focused on how the American students interested in international social work or development can learn from social work practices in other countries (Midgley, Hokenstad & Khinduka, 1992), and how international practicum sites can be better organized to provide meaningful learning experiences for American students interested in international social work (Boyle et al., 1999; Reisch and Jarman-Rohde, 2000). Although courses are being introduced within social work education that address global issues and enable the social work profession to respond to globalization, many scholars have agreed that the efforts are not enough and that more work needs to be done to enhance the internationalization of social work. According to Midgley (1995; 1999), international social work should contribute effectively to the development agenda. Social work should be at the center of these challenging global trends (Dominelli, 1997) and develop solutions for common concerns that transcend regional boundaries (Ahmadi, 2003).

Today, international students in graduate schools of social work in the United States are a common phenomenon (Rai, 2002). These students come to graduate schools to prepare themselves for leadership in the social work profession. The international students' education must prepare them to face the challenges of developing the profession in their home countries, which in some cases is still in its infancy (Shera & Bogo, 2001). Due to the limited choices of courses and opportunities to practice social work that would be directly relevant to their context, these students engage in a continuous process of realigning the academic knowledge gained in the United States to the local realities of social work practice. The result of these attempts can be profound innovations that translate into successfully implemented development projects. These development projects are a combination of knowledge based on the theories learned in their America education and the knowledge of indigenous and culturally competent practice.

In the discourse of international social work education, very little is said about the learning experiences and contributions of international graduate social work students, or how they use

acquired academic knowledge upon returning to their home countries. Studies have been conducted that investigate the psychological factors in the learning experience of international students. These include their attitudes, satisfaction, and perception of the curriculum (Rai, 2002). However, very little is known about how international students harmonize western theoretical models with their locality specific practice.

The need to document the innovative ways that international graduate students harmonize their knowledge gained in and the US with locality-specific practice cannot be overemphasized. Such documentation will begin to develop a body of knowledge that will inform graduate schools of social work on how to enrich the learning experiences of their international graduate students, and will also provide a platform to begin a discourse that will unravel ways of actively integrating these students into American social work education programs. These international students serve as agents of change and potential vehicles for the dissemination of best practices in social work.

The primary mission of social work programs in the United States is to serve domestic students (Rai, 2001). These programs are already stretched in trying to accomplish this primary mission. Catering to international students is an added challenge but most programs have tried to integrate an international focus into their curriculum. Johnson (1996) identifies some of the common areas where social work programs incorporate international social work into their curricula, including elective courses, field placements, international student enrollment, and student practitioner and faculty exchanges (Johnson, 1996, p 189).

Some international students have sought to maintain their ties with the projects and social service programs that they worked for prior to engaging in graduate studies. This continued relationship provides students with the opportunity to integrate their previous experience with their new skills and apply both to required classroom assignments; this integration and application ultimately benefits the project or social service program back home. Examples of such applicable assignments are project proposals, project evaluations, data analysis, and fund-raising proposals. These types of innovative student projects initiated by graduate students of social work have proved to be cost-effective although not adequate to cover the needs of the international student.

Some international students seek practicum placements in their home countries, other foreign countries, or in international organizations in the United States. Students use these opportunities to connect with professionals and practices that will be most helpful to their future work. The challenge of such practicum placements, particularly those in foreign countries, usually involves finances—students must raise money for their travel and living expenses in the countries in which they complete their practica. Some students or programs reduce costs during such placements by acquiring housing in host agencies' living quarters; however, the cost of undertaking such ventures remains prohibitive for many students.

As a result many international students have chosen to work with refugees and immigrants who have similar characteristics to the groups that they will work with in their future practice. This provides them with an entry point to practice as they sharpen their skills. The highly restrictive work regulations of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (INS), however that international students must follow significantly limit the window of opportunity for students to pursue practical experience in the United States.

In addition to the challenges faced by international students for practice opportunities, students have a very limited range of choices to enhance their learning experiences in the United States. To find a comprehensive opportunity is rare, and due to pressure of the academy, few faculty have the extra time or resources to mentor students who wish to venture into unconventional ways of learning. When such opportunities occur, it is imperative that they are documented to provide an example of what can be incorporated in the curricula to provide a rich learning environment for international students.

This paper documents a case study of African graduate students at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis. The graduate students engaged in a process of harmonizing and synthesizing the knowledge they gained in their graduate studies and transferred it into social work practice in their home continent of Africa through the implementation of a social development strategy. This process resulted in an asset-building project called AssetsAfrica. The pilot project of this initiative is ongoing and has provided not only data for a doctoral dissertation, but more importantly, assets for poor households in Uganda and a well-documented example of the innovative contribution of international social work graduate students when the harmonization of education and indigenous practice is successful.

A Case Study: The Formation of AssetsAfrica Project Group

A group of five African graduate students at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St Louis came together to find ways of enhancing their graduate school learning experience. Together these students were interested in improving the social and economic well-being of the poor in Sub-Saharan Africa through asset development. Before coming to the United States most of the students had worked on income generating activities and micro enterprises for the poor in various countries in Africa. These students sought to link their experiences with the asset-building research at the Center for Social Development (CSD) at Washington University. A series of steps were undertaken by the group to implement the project. Table 1 summarizes the stages and highlights the main points of each stage.

Group Formation
The students came together to identify goals and specific aims for the group, both long and short-term, to guide the process. From the beginning the group agreed that this was not only an academic exercise to investigate asset-building theory in Africa, but also a project with practical implications for the poor in Africa.

Tasks to be accomplished were identified and recorded with each group member responsible for various tasks for each project phase. For example, during the initial meetings, the group agreed that it was necessary to understand the type of asset building currently taking place in Africa. Pathways to asset building such as savings, micro-loans for micro-enterprise, and remittances were identified, and each member of the group was then tasked with researching one pathway, writing a short report of their findings, and presenting it to the group at a meeting.

Table 1. Stages of the process model

Stages	Main highlights of stage
Group formation	Leadership
	Consultation and goal setting
	Defining parameters for operation
	Task sharing
Realignment of knowledge and practice	Model reconceptualization
	Consultation with field organization for reconceptualization
Implementation of model/project	Identifying host organization
	Visiting /exchange with selected host organization
	Negotiating terms of operation
	Capacity building for both students and organization
Evaluation and reflection	Relinquishing ownership
	Research for knowledge building
Disengagement	Continuity
	Sustainability
	New interests

Realignment of Knowledge and Practice

The students in the group were interested in using the Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) developed by Sherraden (1991) in the United States as an asset-building tool. However, due to the economic, social and cultural differences between the United States and Africa, an asset-development model relevant to the African context needed to be developed. The model was similar to matched savings programs (e.g. Individual Development Accounts) pioneered in the United States, but had several unique features:

1) Due to the under-developed banking system in rural Africa, formal institutions to mobilize rural savings are not in place (Ikhide, 1996). The group decided to contract with a local bank to operate a mobile bank that would visit the village weekly to collect savings. The mobile bank would allow participants in the project to complete transactions in the village when they needed to. However, those who had means to travel to the local bank would be free to do so. In addition, the project would complement the existing institutions at the local level. The project would use the local community institutions such as village committees for coordination of the banking system and the selection of participants. Therefore, community trust in the committees would be an important component of the project.

2) Africans generally own property communally, particularly in villages. Assets are owned by families, and communities, in contrast to individualistic ownership so common in the US. To accommodate the different types of ownership, the unit of participation in the project was made flexible. Saving could be organized individually, as a group, as a family, or as a community. This flexibility would support the communal focus of the African culture. In

the United States, an Individual Development Account involves an individual who saves towards acquiring a desired asset in collaboration with or without his or her family.

3) Unlike the asset goals like education and housing typical of US-based IDAs the project's asset goals would be instrumental, productive assets. Asset goals were to be decided at the local level, based on local needs. These assets would be productive, bringing in more income or more food for family economic stability. Assets would predominantly be related to agriculture or a small business, and would include such things as irrigation equipment, oxen, motorcycles, telephone booths, and farming equipment.

4) Due to the high inflation rates in Africa, asset prices change frequently, making it difficult to establish an asset goal. Participants would establish four asset goals, prioritized in order of expense. This arrangement would offer alternatives to participants whose asset goal prices changed during the time they were accumulating savings.

Apart from the unique features of the model, similar features to the US-based IDAs would also be part of the project. The project would have an incentive of match funds for participants at a 1:1 rate. In addition, financial education and asset-specific training[1] would be offered to the participants. Other training would include whatever skills were required for the participants to enhance their asset accumulation strategies. These included group dynamics and HIV/AIDS prevention[2].

Sustainability of the project was also one of the main concerns that the student group had. To address this concern, the implementation would incorporate the government of the host country to continue funding the project after the phase out of funding from the funding partner.

Implementation of Model/Project
Considering the economic and cultural issues particular to Africa's limited resources, the group decided to test this method of asset accumulation in one country. The goal was to use this country to develop a model and depending on the success, replicate it in other African countries across the continent. A process was developed to invite each member of the group to recommend up to three organizations that they had worked with in their country prior to coming to the United States. After these organizations were identified, criteria to choose the organization that would host the pilot project were established. These criteria included the following: reputation, leadership/management capacity, sustainability, existing project inclusion of asset goals, and willingness to partner with the group. Documents that would support these criteria from each of these organizations were submitted and assessed on a case-by-case basis. All members of the group voted to determine their top three organizations, then voted again to choose the best of three. International Care and Relief (ICR) in Uganda was the organization that was identified to host the organization. The group communicated with ICR Uganda about their expectations, the concept of asset building, the goals of the group, and the criteria used to choose the organization. A representative from ICR Uganda was

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[1] This training would be offered to participants to train them in the operational activities of their acquired asset if such skills were needed.
[2] HIV/AIDS prevention was seen as important as it is one of the major development challenges in Africa and would affect project participants.

invited to visit the group to develop relationships to the members and to discuss the possibility of ICR Uganda hosting this pilot asset-building project for Africa.

Evaluation and Reflection
After the visit from the ICR Uganda representative, the group engaged in a reflective exercise of the discussions conducted. Problems were identified and communicated with the host organization and changes were made. Negotiations were made on problem areas. An evaluation was made whether to go ahead and engage ICR Uganda. After a period of evaluation and reflection, the group agreed to engage ICR Uganda to host the pilot project. An agreement was reached that the research would be conducted parallel to the operation of the project. This data would not only serve as data for the dissertation of one of the group members but would also serve as a blueprint for the replication of this type of program in other African countries.

Disbanding
After ICR Uganda was chosen, the implementation of the project was handed over to them. Most of the group members were near graduation and went on to initiate similar projects with other groups. The group disbanded and the graduate student, whose dissertation would be based on project research, took over the administration of the research component of the project.

The stages that the African student group went through in harmonizing the knowledge they gained in their graduate education in the US and implementing an asset-building pilot project in Uganda can be adopted, to assist in utilizing the innovative skills of international students. This model could be included in curricula as an ongoing opportunity for students to engage in expanding their skill set so that they can enhance their education. The exchange that occurred between the members of the group was important as it allowed the independent growth of the students in their knowledge of practicing what they were learning in class.

Figure 1: Stages of the innovative harmonization of US graduate education knowledge with locally relevant social work practice
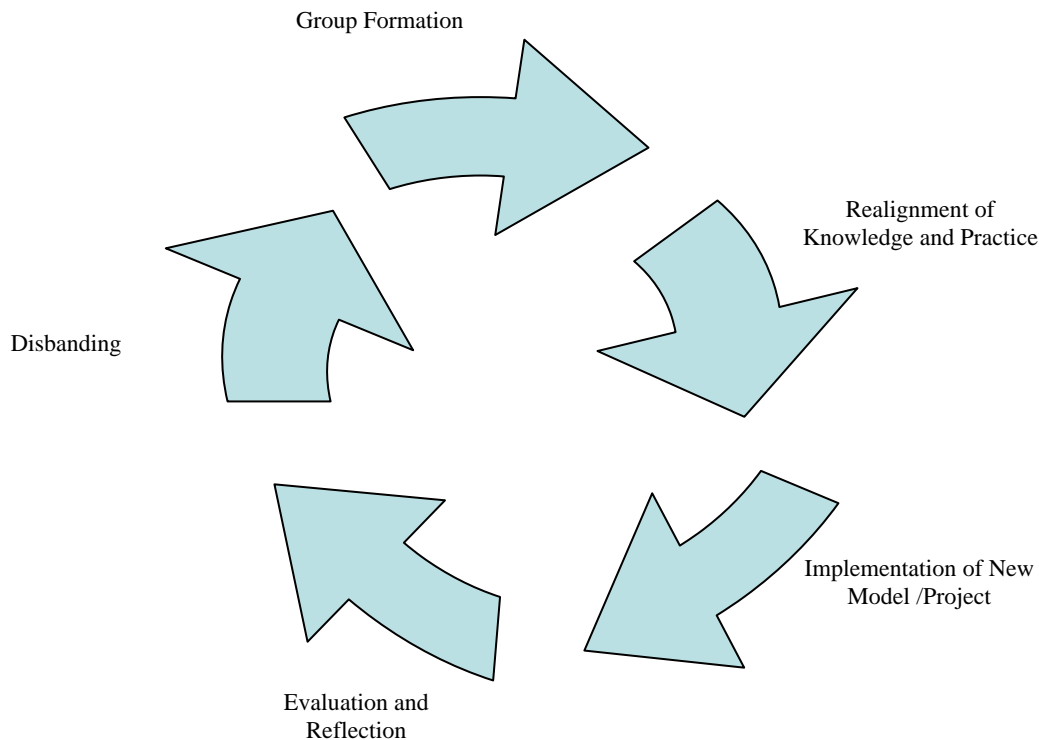
Lessons Learned

Revisiting the project goals proved to be very important to the success of the project. Throughout the process, the group needed to revisit the goals for refocusing and redirecting the group. Having established the primary goals in the beginning of the process helped the group to focus and maintain their direction with a steady pace and enthusiasm. The goals served as the benchmark for success as well; whenever a goal was achieved, the morale in the group was boosted. When ICR Uganda was identified to host the project, for example, the group was encouraged by its success. The shift from pure conversations and hypothetical situations to having an actual organization which could contribute to the development of the project was a big and tangible success.

As the primary funder of the effort, CSD provided not only resources but also leadership which proved invaluable to the group throughout the process. Without the resources and support provided by CSD, this project would not have been possible. In hindsight, it would have been more beneficial to involve a couple of organizations from the field throughout the process of model development. The benefit of having more than one organization at the table during this preliminary stage is obvious—different organizations have varying expertise and experience from the field and a blend of these perspectives would have been richer. Verification of the organizational capacity in the field

before engagement was also important but was not done due to limited resources. However, with limited resources, the group utilized what was available to the best of their ability.

Clarifying the intentions of the group to the host organization was of cardinal importance as well. This became very clear after the engagement phase because repeatedly the leadership had to clarify several issues such as funding, research agenda, and the capacity of the pilot project as a model to be replicated. Documentation became important for reference as the communication progressed. This helped to clarify issues and also to pass on information to the project officers on the ground. One of the issues that was very important to clarify was funding.

From the start the funding amount was made clear to the organization to ensure that the planning was done according to the available resources. This helped the team to be practical and realistic in terms of the scope of the project. It also helped the team focus on what was crucial to the project and to seek partnership with ICR Uganda for the other activities that were peripheral to the project. The partnership also enhanced the ownership of the project by ICR Uganda because they were also investing in the project.

Implications for Social Work Education

Due to the increasing numbers of international students in American social work programs, there is a need for social work programs to find ways of offering enriching and challenging opportunities for international students without abandoning the program's primary mission. As evidenced in this case study, international students have already engaged in innovative ways of meeting their needs by identifying relevant means of utilizing available resources to practice as they would upon return to their home countries.

However, the roles of international social work graduate students are often under-utilized and certainly undocumented in many schools of social work across the United States. Although international graduate students could contribute significantly to the educational process of social work programs in the United States, they often do not find the opportunity or resources to do so. However, social work programs can play a pivotal role in facilitating the utilization of their international students' existing knowledge of locally specific culture and their new social work skills. This can be done by providing resources, leadership and a suitable environment for the engagement of international graduate students in curricular processes, research, and practicum in other countries. These resources could include identifying and creating projects and assignments that international graduate students could engage in that are relevant to their future career objectives and possibly to the mission of the social work program as a whole.

Research conducted in international students' home countries, such as that documented in this case study, engages students in relevant work. Although financial constraints are often a challenge in such research projects, when resources are available or can be made available, it is an excellent opportunity for students to engage in work that is directly related to their practice context. Such research not only expands the social work profession domestically and internationally, it also helps with knowledge building efforts that students will be pursuing after graduation, such as data for student dissertations, publications and as spring boards for expertise in the student's area of interest as they develop in their career.

Conclusion

Given the current discourse regarding the internationalization of social work curriculum, it would be timely to expand this discussion to include the international social work students themselves and the role they may play in creating innovative additions to the social work curriculum. This may mean that the profession explores how to integrate the often under-utilized resources of international students to expand the thinking of faculty and students alike. Social work programs could reexamine the role of maximizing the opportunity international students bring to the social work profession both domestically and internationally and begin providing relevant classroom assignments, opportunities to contribute to the literature through documented research projects, and identifying linkages students bring to international organizations.

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