

Title

Embedding the developmental approach in social work with older persons: Prospects and challenges for Lesotho

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Abstract

Although social work has evolved greatly since its inception in the late 19th century, it is faced with the need to adopt more appropriate interventions to address the needs of service users. This is mainly because of the shift of interest towards service user involvement in the assessment of the services they require and the rise of evidence-based practice. The paradigm shift in the orientation of Lesotho's Ministry of Social Development in 2012, from welfare to the developmental approach presents opportunities for holistic and comprehensive service delivery for vulnerable people, older persons included. Furthermore, the establishment of the Department of Elderly Care Services in 2013, in the Ministry of Social Development was a strategic move in the implementation of the developmental approach in service delivery for older persons. However, progress in the implementation of the developmental approach in service delivery for older persons is constrained by inadequate financial and human resources, lack of specialised training for social workers on this strategy, and political instability that has resulted in frequent changes in government.

Key words

developmental approach, Lesotho, older persons, social welfare services, social work

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Introduction

The main responsibility for the provision of social welfare services in Lesotho, inclusive of those for older persons, rests with the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD). Pursuant to the MoSD's mandate to provide social welfare services in the country, there was a policy and paradigm shift from welfare to a developmental focus in 2012. This reorientation was significant as the colonial legacy of social work services in Lesotho, and elsewhere in many African countries, has always had a residual, ameliorative and remedial focus. The problem with such an approach is that it does not empower service users to become self-reliant nor address the root causes of social problems. Furthermore, the increasing representation of older persons in the population demands new or reimagined responses for the optimisation of their quality of life and to mitigate the challenges of population ageing. The developmental approach involves measures to prevent and reduce poverty, deprivation and inequality in society. This manuscript examines the findings on the prospects and challenges in the implementation of the developmental approach in service delivery for older persons in Lesotho.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical approach adopted for this study was the developmental approach, also referred to as social development or developmental social work (Midgley, 2014; Patel, 2015; Tanga, 2015). Although the developmental approach does not have a universal definition, the authors view it as a strategy encompassing human rights, strengths-based and systems approaches aimed at enhancing people and their communities' livelihood capabilities. It is a pro-poor approach aimed at meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged in order to promote social justice and development.

The approach employs social investment strategies alongside empowering, community-based, participatory and rights-based interventions to enhance the capabilities of the poor and marginalised, as well as by facilitating their participation in productive economic activities. It involves the development of capacities of people, as well as the promotion of self-reliance and the prevention of social problems. It also embraces human rights, strengths-based and systems perspectives.

Human rights are the foundation of the developmental approach, which entails practice that is people-centered (Androff, 2016). Some of its key principles are: participation, accountability, empowerment, social integration and accessibility of social welfare services. As such, a rights-based approach is likely to enrich and enhance service delivery initiatives as it integrates elements of participation and empowerment in a coherent practice framework. Also significant is that the rights-based approach aims to strengthen the capability and capacity of institutions,

including the state and civil society, to deliver on their mandate of promoting and protecting human rights.

The strengths-based approach is another tenet of the developmental approach. From this perspective, it is believed that it is more effective to focus on a client's personal, relational and community assets, rather than focusing on their deficits (Pulla, 2017). The developmental approach also employs the general systems perspective, which recognises that every person is part of system of interdependent parts linked to each other. As such, no part of the system can be understood in isolation from the other parts of the system (Nomaguchi, Brown & Leyman, 2015).

In a nutshell, the developmental approach emphasises the development of capacities of service users as part of a system, promotion of self-reliance, prevention of social problems and interagency and multidisciplinary collaboration. It also focuses on the poor and marginalised to alleviate poverty and to enhance their participation in problem solving. On this basis, the developmental approach resonates with the founding principles of the social work profession, namely human rights and social justice. Hence, the aforementioned defining features of the developmental approach were adopted to provide the lens for studying service delivery for older persons in Lesotho. The section below provides background information to the study.

Background

The adoption of the National Policy on Social Development 2014/2015-2024/2025 signaled a shift from welfare to a developmental approach in the provision of social welfare services in Lesotho. This move was precipitated by the failure of the welfare approach to address problems of poverty, food insecurity and the social exclusion of vulnerable people, older persons included. This lays bare the fact that social work in the African context has overutilized the welfare approach, which only offers temporary relief because of its minimalist orientation, rather than lasting solutions to social problems.

Although the term older person does not have a universal definition, this article adopts the age of 60 years and above, which was agreed upon at the United Nations World Assembly on Ageing at Madrid, Vienna in 1982. According to the Bureau of Statistics (BOS) (2013), approximately 8% of Lesotho's population comprised of older persons aged 60 years and above. This is expected to rise to about 11.5% by the year 2030 (MoSD & HelpAge, 2014).

The exponential growth in the number of people 60 years of age in Lesotho, as elsewhere in other parts of the world, on the one hand, and increasing longevity on the other, poses a serious challenge not only for their health care, but social protection as well. This is primarily because this demographic shift is yet to be matched with the resources, skills and government commitment to respond to the needs of the growing number of older persons (Adamek, Kotecho, Chane & Gebeyaw, 2021). It is therefore paradoxical that

even though longevity is an invaluable achievement of the 21st century, this demographic dividend is wasted as a result of the socioeconomic and health challenges afflicting older persons.

They experience poverty, food insecurity, abandonment and neglect, resulting in some living alone. Older women in Lesotho are also victims of sexual abuse, witchcraft accusations and denial of rights to inheritance as a result of gender discrimination (MoSD, 2014). Thus, given their vulnerability, older persons require new frameworks of support to ensure their inherent dignity and rights (Teater & Chanody, 2017).

From the foregoing, it is apparent that ageing in Lesotho, as in other African countries, is occurring in the absence of effective arrangements to ensure the wellbeing of older persons. Yet, older persons can play critical roles in their families and society in general. Such roles include contributing to the household economy, leadership, socialisation, education of the youth, and protective and mystical functions, among others (Obioha & Tso'enyane, 2012).

The aim of this study was to explore the challenges and prospects of embedding the features of the developmental approach in service delivery for older persons in Lesotho. Its objectives were:

1. To examine the extent to which the defining features of the developmental approach have been embedded into social work services for older persons in Lesotho.
2. To ascertain the prospects of infusing features of the developmental approach in the provision of services for older persons in Lesotho (MoSD).
3. To explore the challenges faced in the implementation of the developmental approach in service delivery for older persons in Lesotho.

Methodology

This study was qualitative in nature, supported by explorative, descriptive and contextual research designs. Data were collected from older persons, social workers (SWs) and social auxiliary workers (SAWs) employed in the MoSD, utilising semi-structured interview guides with open-ended questions that facilitated in-depth interviews with participants. It is important to note at this stage that though SWs and SAWs operate at district and community levels respectively, and they provide more or less the same services. As such, older persons who participated in the study could not make a distinction between the two, hence they are referred to in this manuscript as social service providers (SSP). Furthermore, given that the study was qualitative, it applied the principle of “data saturation” (Schmidt & Brown, 2015), resulting in a sample size of 13 older persons, 11 SWs and 10 SAWs.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Department of Social Work's Ethics Committee at the University of South Africa (UNISA) (Ref #: DR & EC_2016_007). A letter explaining the study and requesting for permission to interview social workers and social auxiliary workers in the districts of Berea, Leribe and Maseru was written to the Principal Secretary in the MoSD (Lesotho). The request was acceded to and the letter granting permission (SD/ADMIN/A/5) was copied to the district managers for Berea, Leribe and Maseru. Upon getting permission from the Principal Secretary, appointments were made with the respective district managers to explain the study and for permission to interview their social workers and social auxiliary workers. As for the older persons recruited using the snowball sampling method, the purpose of the study was explained to them and the interviews were only done after they consented to participate in the study. The ethical standards of confidentiality, informed consent, management of information and no harm to the participants were adhered to. The anonymity of participants was guaranteed by not using their names or any information that could be traced to them.

Purposive sampling was applied for SWs and SAWs, from the MoSD in the districts of Berea, Leribe and Maseru in Lesotho. Snowball sampling, whereby participants with whom prior contact had already been made, referred the researcher to potential participants (Cavanaugh & Blanchard-Fields, 2019) aged 60 years or above from the same districts. The older persons were those who had received services from the MoSD following the adoption of the developmental approach in 2012.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the prospects and challenges faced in the implementation of the developmental approach in the provision of services for older persons in Lesotho. The presentation of findings focuses only on the services received by older persons in the study. It also focuses on the extent to which the delivery of these services embeds features of the developmental approach, as well as the challenges and prospects of infusing this approach in service delivery for older persons.

The gender composition of the participants (older persons) was 11 females and two males, which can be attributed to the fact that women live longer than men. Nine of the participants were widows which is consistent with the view that women outlive their male counterparts. The age range of the participants was 60 to 90 years, with two of them in the 80 to 90 years category, which also shows that people in Lesotho are living longer than before.

Participants indicated that they had received at least one of the following services: facilitation of membership in self-help groups, food parcels and toiletries, counselling and psychosocial support and public assistance. They had also received support with payment of school fees for

grandchildren and old age pension from the Department of Pensions. The presentation and discussion of findings in the section below is based on the afore-mentioned services.

Facilitation of self-help groups

Eight participants indicated that they were members of support groups, two were members of burial societies and an equal number were in savings clubs facilitated by SWs and SAWs. This was also confirmed by a SW as follows:

I am involved in the process of forming social clubs and support groups. This is a programme that has been rolled out nationally. We go to communities and facilitate the formation of social clubs. This is so that older persons can be assisted with their daily needs such as fetching water and other things around their home. This helps in fighting isolation and loneliness and also promote their wellbeing. (SW #11).

Although the storyline above shows that the facilitation of self-help groups helps to relieve stress and to provide emotional and financial support, it is also evident that this is not a service that the older persons had requested for. As such, the element of participation in the identification and resolution of problems is the missing link. Yet, participation is a critical feature in embracing the developmental approach. Nonetheless, the facilitation of self-help groups helps to develop coping mechanisms and problem solving skills. At the same time members enjoy support from each other and discover new ways of coping and managing their situation. This confirms the view that support groups promote access to services, help to overcome social isolation and feelings of alienation and stigmatisation that are common in old age (Strydom & Strydom, 2010). Self-help initiatives are thus a form of social protection for members who pool their resources together. To this end, the promotion of self-help initiatives is developmental as beneficiaries participate in the process of improving their circumstances, as well as their wellbeing.

Although self-help initiatives are an effective strategy for promoting self-reliance, which is one of the features of the developmental approach, this should not take away the responsibility of the state to provide financial and technical support to ensure the integration of older persons into mainstream societal activities. There should be an alignment to social investments, as this is at the core of the developmental approach.

Furthermore, the forces that perpetuate poverty and inequality transcend individual, group and community levels and are often a function of structural socio-political systems obtaining in the country. This suggests the need for the government to be involved in supporting self-help groups and initiatives to bring about their sustainability and to improve the livelihood of older persons.

Food parcels and toiletries

A participant illustrated that they received food assistance, bath soap and vaseline from SSPs providers commenting: *I count myself lucky that I sometimes get maize meal, beans and bath soap from the social workers. The social workers [MoSD] come with officers from Help Lesotho [an NGO working with grandmothers in Leribe] and they give us these things sometimes. (Participant #2).*

From a human rights perspective, the provision of food assistance is developmental as this is a basic need. However, this was only possible because of the partnership arrangement between the MoSD and Help Lesotho. There is also a limitation in that food assistance does not empower beneficiaries to become independent, and yet self-reliance is a key feature of the developmental approach.

Furthermore, dependence on donor funding is not a reliable intervention for the provision of services for the poor and vulnerable, older persons included. Donor driven programmes are not sustainable in the event that funding is withdrawn. Also challenging is the lack of adequate budgetary allocation (MoSD) to finance services for vulnerable people and groups (Mosito, 2014).

In addition, incorporating developmental aspects in the provision of food assistance to older persons has a number of challenges. These were summarised by a SAW as follows:

Some older persons do not have fields where they can grow crops to meet their food requirements. Their fields have either been taken by relatives or other people in their community. There are cases where they are perceived to be too old to do any farming and their fields are taken by other people. Sometimes they are not allocated any fields by the chief. (SAW #8)

It is clear from the narrative above, that older persons are confronted with a number of challenges, including dispossession of their fields and ageism, that inhibit the implementation of the developmental approach to service delivery for older persons. This suggests that social workers (MoSD) should engage in awareness raising campaigns on the rights of older persons. In addition, they should also perform advocacy roles for older persons to access land for agricultural production, as well as agricultural inputs such as maize, which is the staple food in Lesotho.

Counselling and psychosocial support

Four of the 13 participants reported that they had received counselling and psychosocial support from SSPs. Although the provision of counselling is developmental, in that it stimulates the energy and capacity of the client to contribute towards their own wellbeing and that of others, the utilisation of Western psychologies and counselling methods focusing on individuals is of limited effectiveness in the African context. Individuals in the African context are embedded in family and community structures.

Thus, interventions focusing on individuals risk alienating them from their communities. From a developmental perspective relatives and members of the community play an essential role in the wellbeing of members as part of a broader entity (Spitzer, 2014:23). Moreover, in cases where emotional distress is as result of poverty, the provision of psychosocial counselling on its own is of limited effectiveness.

Public assistance

Public assistance is one of the services offered to all destitute and vulnerable people in Lesotho. However, it excludes from coverage those aged 70 years and above, who are catered for under the universal old age pension scheme. Only one of the four participants from the age of 60 to 69 years received public assistance, which shows that very few older persons benefit from this programme. Furthermore, the public assistance allowance, which is SAR250 monthly (paid after 3 months as SAR750) is not enough to meet their needs for food, shelter and medical care, among others.

As such, the right of older persons to social security enshrined in *inter alia*, the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Older Persons Policy of Lesotho is not being met. To this extent, public assistance in Lesotho is not developmental as it falls short in enabling recipients to meet their right to adequate income and other basic needs.

In addition, the provision of public assistance is not a sufficient condition for alleviating poverty in old age, which is one of the goals of the developmental approach. This is because it is provided on a selective basis, owing to the means-testing that is applied. It is also inadequate and cannot be expected to empower recipients to become self-reliant, let alone address the problem of poverty. Its provision is based on a minimalist approach, which is the antithesis of the developmental approach.

The major challenge in transforming public assistance to a developmental programme, is the shortage of financial resources. Nine SWs and four SAWs indicated that the budgetary allocation for public assistance was not enough to cater for all applicants. Furthermore, the lack of specialised training on the developmental approach was said to be an impediment to its infusion into social work practice with older persons. This was explained by one of the SWs as follows:

We didn't learn about the developmental approach in social work with older persons during our Bachelor of Social Work training. So, most of the time I will only be assessing whether or not the older persons qualify for public assistance. (SW, 5).

Social work training at the University of Lesotho, as is the case in other African countries, where all except two social workers trained, provides generalist social work training. There is no specialised training on developmental social work with older persons. Resultantly, some SSPs felt

inadequate in applying the approach to their practice with older persons.

Support with payment of school fees for grandchildren

Some participants revealed that they had received support with the payment of school fees for their grandchildren. This was expressed by one of them as follows:

It is about four years ago when Help Lesotho helped me to get the child grant for my granddaughter from the MoSD. Hey, it took long to get the money, but we eventually got it. (Participant #2).

The study found that 10 of the 13 participants were caring for orphaned grandchildren. Of these only three received support in the form of the child grant. This is because the child grant in Lesotho is means-tested and as result very few children benefit from this grant.

Nonetheless, the provision of child grants for orphaned and vulnerable children is developmental as it is an investment in their physical and mental health and wellbeing. With access to education their chances of getting employment in their adulthood and to escape from poverty are improved. This assistance is also likely promote the mental health of their caregivers, which is critical for their wellbeing. However, the extent to which child grants are developmental is limited because of the selective nature of this service.

Old age pension

Five of the seven participants aged 70 years and above received the universal old age pension. However, unlike in Eswatini and South Africa where old age pension is administered by the Department of Social Welfare and Department of Social Development respectively, in Lesotho it is the responsibility of the Department of Pensions under the Ministry of Finance.

The old age pension is SAR550 monthly, which is inadequate in meeting the needs of pensioners. Thus, although old age pension meets the right of older persons to an income, and is therefore to some extent developmental, it is limited in that it is inadequate and does not meet the other needs of older persons, such as housing.

Furthermore, its transformation to a developmental scheme is hampered by the fragmentation of services for older persons between the MoSD and the Department of Pensions. This suggests the need to transfer old age pension to the MoSD, so that services for older persons are provided under one roof. This ensures the provision of holistic and comprehensive services, in line with the dictates of the developmental approach.

Discussion

The adoption of the developmental approach by the MoSD in 2012 and the National Policy on Social Development

2014/2015-2024/2025, among other initiatives, attest to social work as being a critical stakeholder in efforts to promote social development and poverty reduction among vulnerable people in Lesotho, older persons included. It reflects the relevance of social work in social development and poverty reduction. In this regard, the policy shift of the MoSD in 2012 from welfare to a developmental thrust, was a major milestone as its goals of promoting human wellbeing and social inclusion, resonate with those of the social work profession.

Moreover, the developmental approach is a comprehensive approach to welfare, given that it employs social investment strategies and empowering community-based, participatory and rights-based interventions. It encompasses a range of eclectic perspectives that are pivotal in its implementation. These are namely, human rights, strengths-based and systems approaches, which should be implemented in the transformation of social welfare services towards developmental practice.

Although to some extent, the provision of public assistance and the facilitation of self-help initiatives is developmental, this fails to promote the livelihoods and wellbeing of older persons in Lesotho. High and persistent poverty remains a significant challenge for older persons in Lesotho, which not only exposes the limitations of the developmental approach, but weaknesses in its implementation as well.

While it is granted that the provision of public assistance and food assistance to older persons is a basic human right and therefore developmental, this is compromised by the fact that only a few benefit from this service. Furthermore, the benefits for those who are lucky to qualify for assistance are so little and cannot be expected to take them out poverty. Hence, the public assistance programme is not developmental, because it does not propel recipients out of poverty, and neither does it foster self-reliance. Yet, one of the central goals of the developmental approach is to eradicate poverty.

As such, the implementation of the developmental approach in the provision of public assistance, food assistance, promotion of self-help initiatives and counselling and psychosocial support is not accompanied by empowerment strategies (a key aspect of the approach) owing to the lack resources in the MoSD. The lack of resources is a major indictment in embedding the developmental approach in the provision of social work services for older persons in Lesotho.

Also central in the implementation of the developmental approach is the need to embrace the strengths-based approach in the provision of services to older persons. This is grounded in the belief that all people have existing competencies, resources, and are capable of learning new skills and problem solving to address their own problems. The strengths-based dimension of the developmental approach is concerned with identifying a client's inner and outer resources to promote resilience (Pulla, 2017).

However, the application of the strengths-based approach in work with older persons in Lesotho is fraught with challenges. One of them is the requirement that clients wanting social work services lodge their applications for services at social welfare services. This is problematic in that older persons may not be able to access social welfare offices owing to mobility challenges. Moreover, without an assessment of their needs and the challenges (at their homes) they face, it will be difficult to identify their strengths and resources. Yet, this is essential for helping clients to realise positive and lasting change.

Implementation of the strengths-based approach is also constrained by the shortage of staff and vehicles (transport) for home visits to homes of older persons. It is important to carry out comprehensive assessments of the situation of older persons, including the availability of support from the family, community and government, as well as challenges faced. Without adequate staff and transport for home visits it is difficult to carry out assessment visits to the homes of older persons.

Recommendations

Below are some of the recommendations based on the findings of the study.

- SSPs should engage in advocacy to ensure that the rights of older persons to dignity, social security and protection, health, and housing, among others are respected.
- The multiplicity and diversity of the needs of older persons requires that SSP engage in multidisciplinary collaboration to ensure the provision of integrated services. Such collaboration can be with NGOs, the Department of Pensions and the Ministry of Agriculture, for agricultural extension services and inputs such as maize seed, for older persons.
- There is need for the MoSD to lobby parliamentarians for the transfer of the administration of the old age pension programme from Department of Pensions. This would be convenient for older persons to get their services from one agency and for comprehensive provision of services.
- Social workers should encourage volunteerism and civic engagement for functionally able and active older persons, as this helps them to remain active and productive in their communities. It fosters empowerment among the older persons, thereby contributing to their wellbeing and that of their communities.
- The MoSD should provide in-service training for its SSPs on developmental social work with older persons.

Conclusion

Services for older persons in Lesotho remain largely residual and welfare oriented. The implementation of the developmental approach in the provision of services for older persons in Lesotho is constrained by the shortage of both human and material resources and the fragmentation of policies and legislation on older persons. The lack of cooperation and coordination among stakeholders providing services to older persons is also a major problem. As such, it is critical that social workers engage in interagency and multidisciplinary collaboration, as well as advocacy, among other interventions, to ensure that older persons get the services that promote their wellbeing.

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