

# The Role of Social Workers and Community Psychologists in Promoting the Social Welfare of Vulnerable Persons and Groups in Mezam Division of Northwest Cameroon

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## ABSTRACT

Vulnerable populations living in the communities of Mezam Division of the Northwest region of Cameroon suffer from near absent or inadequate social welfare services. Understanding the role of social workers and community service providers such as community psychologists in the community and seeking their assistance when need be would alleviate the mental health and plight of these vulnerable persons in dire need of social welfare. These vulnerable persons and groups include: minors below 18, the elderly, persons with disabilities, persons living with mental illness and HIV/AIDS, indigenous groups such as the Mbororos, orphans, widows, women and internally displaced persons or IDPs. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate the role of social workers and community service providers in promoting the social welfare of vulnerable persons and groups in the Mezam community. More specifically, the study sought to ascertain the extent to which social workers and community service providers perform the role of counsellors, mediators and agents of social change with respect to the promotion of the social welfare of vulnerable populations within in the Mezam community. The employed a case study research design using qualitative techniques. Focus group discussions, interviews and observations were used to obtain qualitative data from a sample of 25 social workers working at office and field locations under the Mezam Divisional Delegation of Social Affairs. Data was analyzed with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0 for Windows. The qualitative data was analyzed using content analysis with the support of ATLAS.ti software version 8.0. Based on the findings, recommendations were made to social workers and community service providers notably community psychologists who were advised to make efforts to increase their mastery of core competencies and skills through additional professional training and to increase the visibility of their services within the community through outreach.

**KEYWORDS:** *Earnings, Stock price, Dividend Yield, Book Value per share, firm size and Developing Economy*

## INTRODUCTION

According to Axinn and Stern (2004), every individual in society aspires to live a healthy, tolerant, safe, inclusive and fair life and social workers play a fundamental role towards the achievement of that goal. A social worker assists people within a wide range of settings, from mental health clinics to schools and hospitals (Axinn & Stern, 2004). Social

workers can work with individuals or within large communities or organizations and assist with a variety of ailments from addiction treatment to chronic illness and child support services. Kirst-Ashman (2006) submits that the impact of a social worker goes beyond just helping people in need. From promoting core values of compassion and

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service to others, to framing research within the field, to informing policy, social workers actively address and stand up for human rights and social injustices. They strengthen individual people and communities and try to give voice to the unheard.

One of the major components of the role of a social worker is the promotion of the social welfare of vulnerable groups in the community. Karger and Stoesz (2004) argue that social welfare concerns itself with all organized societal responses, whether public or private, that provide social services for the assistance of disadvantaged groups and promote the social well-being of a population. According to Day (2005), this would include education, health, rehabilitation, protective services for adults and children, public assistance, social insurance, services for those with physical and mental disabilities, job training programs, marriage counselling, psychotherapy, pregnancy counselling, adoption, and numerous other related activities designed to promote social well-being.

Social workers play the role of counsellors in communities. The idea of the social worker as someone who works with or counsels individuals has been a recurrent and powerful notion in social work throughout its history (Younghusband, 1959). It has also been closely associated with some of the key values of social work and in particular recognising the inherent worth of the individual and respecting the person (Searing, 2004). Counselling and casework of course also appeals to those whose view of social work as a whole is one in which helping or supporting individuals is a key component. According to Statham (2001), there is also implicit in the role of the social worker as counsellor or caseworker the idea that change will be involved in the behaviour or outlook of the client or service user. It is the presence of the casework or counselling role which has been seen to be a major asset for social work as provided through public services.

Social workers are also deemed as mediators. Trying to solve the conflict it is necessary to communicate, however, improper communication may provoke a conflict. Kalliath, Kalliath, Chan Xi and Chan (2019) note that a Social worker working in a family can help families and their members to survive difficult periods by providing support. Social worker as a mediator, is the professional who consults disagreeing and conflicting parties, intermediates resolving their disputes. This process is defined as mediation. One of the most relevant skills of conflict resolution – effective communication. Mediation concept emphasizes that proper communication can help to solve a conflict when family members make amicable

decisions (Budeva, 2019). Mediation is an alternative to court, voluntary, confidential procedure of dispute resolution where one or several third-party independent, impartial persons – mediator and/or mediators help the disputing parties to achieve acceptable dispute solution (Kaminskienė et al., 2013). According to Zaksaitė and Garalevičius (2009) family conflict mediation is the conflict solution process when the third neutral party (mediator) stimulates and helps the conflicting parties to reach a mutual agreement.

Social workers also function as agents of social change. According to Edmonds-Cady, and Wingfield (2017), the social workers' role in social justice is to fight through policy practice and policy advocacy and help clients advocate for themselves. Working toward social justice is a core ethical requirement of all social workers. Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of client. Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice. Nandan, London and Bent-Goodley (2015) argue that social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. In addition, Mathendea and Nhapib (2016) claim that social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people.

According to George and Wilding (2013), social workers assist people to cope with life's challenges by acting as an advocate to raise awareness for client needs and connecting them to solution based programs and services. This is known as the promotion of social welfare. Social welfare is, by its very nature, a dynamic concept, depending entirely on evolving ideas of the responsibility of community and the government in affirmatively promoting the well-being of its members. As the sense of community responsibility develops, the concept of social welfare must inevitably change (Sen, 2017). Not so long ago, our concept of social welfare included almost exclusively relief and service to the underprivileged and the disadvantaged. The needs of the specific individual-rather than the social institutions whose presence or absence affects the needs of individuals-were the focus of attention. Social welfare was thought of largely in terms of

adjusting the individual to his environment rather than in terms of bringing environmental forces into play to assist the individual. Hediger (2000) notes that the new conceptualization of social welfare has been developing under which welfare programs consist not only of counseling and assisting the individual and family in making the necessary adjustments to environment but, more importantly, of marshaling community resources to promote the wellbeing of individuals and of families generally. In other words, we no longer think in terms of a few underprivileged and disadvantaged persons but in terms of all individuals and families (Sen, 2017).

Vulnerable groups or populations include the economically disadvantaged, racial and ethnic minorities, the uninsured, low-income children, the elderly, the homeless, those with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and those with other chronic health conditions, including severe mental illness (George & Wilding, 2013). Aspects of social welfare include: low-cost housing, food aid, general assistance, medical care including counselling, and financial assistance for daily life (Hediger, 2000). These are all provided by different social welfare programs through social workers. Therefore, social welfare includes healthcare, empowerment, housing and other programs geared towards assisting the poor, unemployed and marginalized in society.

Cameroon is among the sub-Saharan African countries that are making enormous progress in the use of social workers and community service providers such as community psychologists as counsellors, mediators and agents of social change. According to Herrera Cano (2021), Cameroon is confronted by neglected humanitarian crises. The ongoing Anglophone Crisis in Western part of the country, the growing refugee crisis in the Eastern part of the country and the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northern part of the country have all exacerbated the need for more social workers to come to the rescue of refugees, internally displaced persons and victims of the crises through the provision of social welfare services.

In Cameroon, the Ministry of Social Affairs is the supervisory organ for social workers in the country. The Ministry of Social Affairs is responsible for the development and implementation of government policy on the prevention, assistance and protection of socially Vulnerable Persons and Groups in the country through social inclusion, national solidarity and sustainable development, a mission established by the Decree of December 9th, 2011 on the organization of the Government. Created in 1975 and reorganized by Decree N° 2017/383 of July 18, 2017,

this is a Ministry that has deployed nearby structures throughout the country, which are the Regional and Divisional delegation of Social Affairs, Operational Technical Units (Social Centres and Social Welfare Services) Institutions and Specialized Institutions. This is done through (The Cameroon Ministry of Social Affairs, 2022):

- Prevention and treatment of juvenile delinquency and social inadaptation
- Fight against social exclusion in partnership with other concerned Ministries;
- Fight against human trafficking, notably minors in partnership with other concerned Ministries;
- Protection of persons who are victims of physical abuse;
- Follow-up of procedures for the protection of children in distress in partnership with other concerned Ministries;
- Follow-up and protection of victims of human trafficking in partnership with other concerned Ministries;
- Follow-up of elderly persons and persons with disability in partnership with other concerned Ministries;
- Follow-up of persons concerned with the usage of drugs in partnership with other concerned Ministries;
- Facilitation and social reinsertion
- National Solidarity;
- Follow-up of training schools of Social Workers;
- Animation, supervision and follow-up of schools and institutions implementing the social protection policy.

It is for this reason that this study decided to work with the Decentralized services of the Ministry of Social Affairs located in the Mezam Division of the Northwest Region of Cameroon to assess the role of social workers within that community.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The researcher observed that the provision of social welfare to socially vulnerable persons and groups such as minors below 18, the elderly, persons with disabilities, persons living with mental illness and HIV/AIDS, indigenous groups such as the Mbororos, orphans, widows, women and internally displaced persons or IDPs is often times absent or inadequate. This is seen in the lack of healthcare, low level of income support, inequality, stigmatization, social exclusion and poverty that characterizes these people

in our society. This unfortunate situation has led to the proliferation of juvenile delinquency, malnutrition, child trafficking and labour, violence at home and school, mental illness, school drop outs, and the exacerbation of poverty in the community. Despite the efforts currently being made by social workers and other community service providers such as community psychologists to promote the social welfare of these vulnerable populations, there is the possibility that greater access and quality of service delivery can only be achieved if social workers increase their visibility through greater community outreach in the performance of their tripartite roles as counsellors, mediators and agents of social change within the immediate Mezam community. With the above contextual argument at hand, this study therefore came in to fill the gap of the above studies by investigating the role of social workers in promoting the social welfare of vulnerable populations in Mezam Division of the Northwest Region of Cameroon.

**Specific Objectives**

- To ascertain the role of the social worker as a counsellor in promoting the social welfare of vulnerable persons and groups in the Mezam community.
- To examine the role of the social worker as a mediator in promoting the social welfare of vulnerable persons and groups in the Mezam community.
- To assess the role of the social worker as an agent of social change in promoting the social welfare of vulnerable persons and groups in the Mezam community.

**METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative methodology or approach was employed and the case study research design was used in this study wherein qualitative techniques were used to manage the data collected for the study. Mezam Division were chosen for this research due to the presence of numerous social workers and community service providers including community psychologists, working tirelessly in hospitals, mental health centres, community based-organizations, international relief organizations and government agencies among others to provide social welfare to vulnerable populations in the area.

The study targeted 36 social workers who are assigned under the Mezam Divisional Delegation of Social Affairs at the office and at different field sites such as hospitals, courts, prisons, police stations, councils, inter alia. The accessible population included 32 social workers who were accessible to the

researcher. The sample consisted of 25 social workers drawn from the government agency using the purposive and snow ball sampling techniques. Focus Group Discussion guides, interview guides, observational checklist and documentation review were used for data collection.

Qualitative data obtained from the interviews, observations, focus group discussions and review of documentation were analyzed using the technique of content analysis and the ATLAS.ti software version 8.0 (Friese, 2011).

**RESULTS**

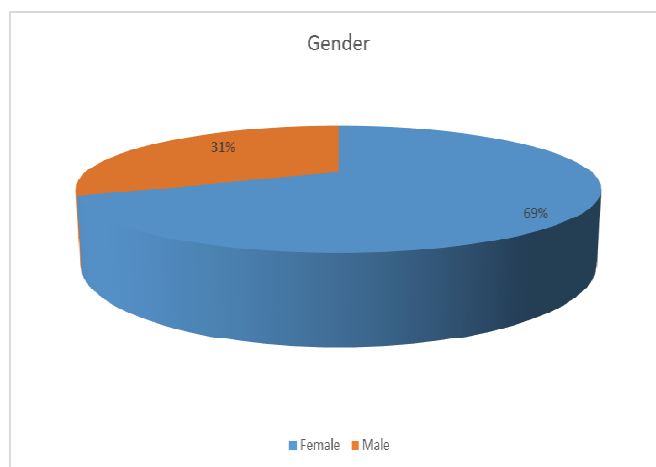
**Demographic profile of the sample**

Demographic profile of the research sample is presented in this section in the form of tables and charts.

**Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to Age**

| Age          | Sample    | Percentage Sample |
|--------------|-----------|-------------------|
| 20-29years   | 5         | 19%               |
| 30-39 years  | 18        | 73%               |
| 40-49 years  | 2         | 8%                |
| 50-60 years  | 0         | 0%                |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>25</b> | <b>100%</b>       |

Table 1 above represents the distribution of respondents according to Age. Out of the 25 respondents selected for this study, 5 of them were aged 20 to 29 years (19%), 18 of them were aged 30 – 39 years (73%) and 2 of them were aged 40 to 49 years (8%) and none of them were aged Between 50-60 years (0%). The distribution of the respondents was in this series: 30 – 39 years > 20 -29 years > 40 – 49 years > 50-60 years.



**Figure 1: Distribution of respondents according to Gender**

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the respondents according to Gender. Out of the 25 respondents selected for this study, 17 of them were female (69%) while 8 of them were male (31%), indicating that

females dominated the study. The gender distribution of the respondents was in this series: female > male.

**Research question one: What is the extent to which social workers perform the role of counsellors in promoting the social welfare of vulnerable populations in the Mezam community?**

The Qual-Quan paradigm was used in presenting findings. From the qualitative data collected and analyzed, majority of the cases (24 respondents) that participated in the focus group discussions, interviews and observations (96%) agreed that social workers perform a primordial role as counsellors in the Mezam community as opposed to one that disagreed (4%).

Case 5 explained that,

*“Most of my clients are vulnerable persons because when you have a mental illness or suffer from a psychological or socio-emotional imbalance, then you’re a vulnerable individual. Most of my clients include internally displaced persons, persons with disabilities, persons living with HIV and AIDs, among others and I consider them as vulnerable. I consider myself as a counsellor because I received training in counselling skills and techniques during my education as a social worker and this is what I use to empower my clients to solve their day-to-day socio-emotional problems”.*

An in-depth thematic analysis of Case 20 revealed that,

*“I receive many clients every week. When they come, I first try to establish rapport with them, then I educate them on confidentiality and I proceed to understand their presenting problem. After this process, I establish the goals of therapy and use therapeutic techniques to explore solutions to the problem of the client. I equally do follow up with clients when they leave in order to avoid relapse.”*

Against this backdrop, the social worker is seen as an effective counsellor who assists clients by empowering them to solve their day psychological, emotional and behavioural problems. This goes a long way to improve the overall mental health and wellbeing of the clients. Through this, the social worker enhances the social welfare of vulnerable persons and groups in the Mezam community.

**Research question two: What is the extent to which social workers perform the role of mediators in promoting the social welfare of vulnerable populations in the Mezam community?**

From the qualitative data collected and analyzed, majority of the cases (23 respondents) that

participated in the focus group discussions, interviews and observations (92%) agreed that social workers perform a primordial role as mediators in the Mezam community as opposed to two respondents that disagreed (8%).

Case 6 explained that,

*“Most of my clients are from broken homes. Some are internally displaced persons. Others are widows and orphans. To me, these persons are part of the vulnerable segment of the community. I consider myself as a mediator because most of my clients are people who have problems with other persons and are seeking redress. A majority of my cases are usually family disputes over land and property. I always endeavor to bring both parties together and resolve their conflicts in a manner that everybody wins.”*

An in-depth thematic analysis of Case 21 revealed that,

*“When an individual in disagreement with another comes to my office, I first and foremost try to bring both parties to the conflict resolution table. When both parties are present, I proceed to hearing from them individually and then together and pinpoint feelings and areas that need to be resolved. Then I use conflict mediation techniques to explore possible solutions to the problem at hand. Once both parties agree on an option, I summarize and encourage them to abide by the resolutions taken. I equally conduct follow up to ensure that both parties are sticking to what they agreed upon.”*

Against this backdrop, the social worker is seen as an effective mediator who assists parties in conflict to heal by coming to the conflict resolution table and exploring options of living in peace and harmony with the other party. This goes a long way to increase social cohesion and harmony in the community. Through this, the social worker enhances the social welfare of vulnerable persons and groups in the Mezam community.

**Research question three: What is the extent to which social workers perform the role of agents of social change in promoting the social welfare of vulnerable populations in the Mezam community?**

From the qualitative data collected and analyzed, majority of the cases (21 respondents) that participated in the focus group discussions, interviews and observations (84%) agreed that social workers perform a primordial role as agents of social change in the Mezam community as opposed to four respondents that disagreed (16%).

Case 7 explained that,

*“I usually work with indigenous communities such as the Mbororos, whom I consider as a vulnerable group in the Mezam community. As part of my work with them, I act as an advocate to lobby for their voices to be heard in the larger society. I consider myself as an agent of social change because I am seeking ways to shift perspectives, attitudes, values, and actions in a manner that addresses social problems in a positive way. I do this by working together with members of the community such as vulnerable persons such as persons with disabilities, persons with HIV and AIDS, the Mbororos, among others alongside partners and hierarchy in devising and implementing strategies that work and bring about social change.”*

An in-depth thematic analysis of Case 22 revealed that,

*“When I identify a social problem such as stigmatization and discrimination against persons with disabilities, I do a social analysis of the issue. Thereafter, I work with community members, the victims, hierarchy and partner organizations to define*

*goals and objectives for intervention through seminars and workshops. With consultation and collaboration, I design intervention strategies that target the specific populations that require sensitization, education and conscientization and I come up with messages that promote the assistance of these persons in the community through street campaigns and public service announcements on radio and other media. After this, I sit back with my peers and evaluate the activities carried out, the milestones achieved and the recommendations and best practices to ensure that future campaigns are better.”*

Against this backdrop, the social worker is seen as an effective agent of social change who assists vulnerable persons and groups by advocating for their rights and lobbying for resources that help to promote social action. This goes a long way to increase the social functioning and flourishing of these vulnerable persons and groups in the community. Through this, the social worker enhances the social welfare of vulnerable persons and groups in the Mezam community.

| Variables   | Decision  |
|---|---|
| <b>The social worker as a counselor</b>               | Social workers to a very high extent (96%) play the role of counsellors in promoting the social welfare of vulnerable populations in the Mezam community.             |
| <b>The social worker as a mediator</b>                | Social workers to a very high extent (92%) play the role of mediators in promoting the social welfare of vulnerable populations in the Mezam community.               |
| <b>The social worker as an agent of social change</b> | Social workers to a very high extent (84%) play the role of agents of social change in promoting the social welfare of vulnerable populations in the Mezam community. |

**Table 2: Summary of the findings Variables Decision**

The social worker as a counselor Social workers to a very high extent (96%) play the role of counsellors in promoting the social welfare of vulnerable populations in the Mezam community.

The social worker as a mediator Social workers to a very high extent (92%) play the role of mediators in promoting the social welfare of vulnerable populations in the Mezam community.

The social worker as an agent of social change Social workers to a very high extent (84%) play the role of agents of social change in promoting the social welfare of vulnerable populations in the Mezam community.

## DISCUSSION

### Social workers as counsellors

Social workers reported diverse opinions which indicated that they perform the role of counsellors in promoting of the social welfare of vulnerable persons

in the Mezam community. To a very high extent (96%), they assess clients through detailed conversations, interviews and observations to determine appropriate testing or examination; diagnose clients’ mental and emotional disorders; create effective plans that include counseling, medication or other services; works with clients and develop goals for therapy; discuss treatment plans with clients on a regular basis to identify faults or room for improvement; and educate clients about appropriate coping mechanisms to help them through tough situations.

The findings are in line with Bandura’s (1977) Social Learning Theory, which posits that learning occurs by observing others and modeling their behaviour, and that in order for social learning to occur, a person must want to emulate the person they are watching. The individual pays close attention to the action and retains the action in memory. Then, the individual

must experience a situation where the behavior can be repeated and must be motivated to repeat the behavior (Bandura, 1977). Social workers help clients to resolve their psychological, socio-emotional and behavioural problems by guiding them towards emulating coping mechanisms and behaviours that facilitate their healing. As a counsellor, the social worker uses psychological techniques to teach clients to model good behaviour and eschew bad behavior that may be the source of their problems.

### **Social workers as mediators**

Social workers also reported varying opinions all pointing to the fact that they perform the role of mediators in promoting of the social welfare of vulnerable persons in the Mezam community. To a very high extent (92%), they begin mediation by listening to each person's story separately, then brings the conflicting parties to meet face to face, allow both parties equal chance to speak and explain their perspectives, explore with both parties mutually beneficial solutions and encourages both parties to settle on one and summarize the agreement once both parties have settled. They also resolve emotions before disputes and addresses tension when it arises, respect boundaries and act quickly.

This finding is in line with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory which states that that people are products of complex systems, rather than individuals who act in isolation and that behavior is influenced by a variety of factors that work together as a system. These factors include family, friends, social settings, religious structure, economic class and home environment, which can all influence how individuals act and think (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The postulates of this theory align with social work because conflicts in the family, in school, at work within organizations and between persons in the community usually stem from a breakdown in interpersonal communication within these complex systems. The role of the social worker as a mediator in conflicts is therefore to identify where systemic breakdowns are affecting behaviour and seeking ways to redress these issues in a manner that benefits all parties involved in the conflict.

### **Social workers as agents of social change**

Social workers also reported varied opinions all linked to the notion that that they perform the role of agents of social change in promoting of the social welfare of vulnerable persons in the Mezam community. To a high extent (84%), they identify and do social analysis of social problems in the community, sets goals and objectives for social action, target groups and roll out specific activities, and set out stakeholder roles and responsibilities as

well as time frames for the execution of activities. They equally project and evaluate the short-term and long-term outcomes of specific actions undertaken, identify available resource and lobby for needed resources to solve social problems, and speak on behalf of vulnerable persons and groups when they cannot speak for themselves.

This finding is in line with Homan (1958) Social Exchange Theory which states that when one person in a relationship has greater personal resources than another, that person is predicted to have greater power as well. This theory can therefore act as a springboard for social workers to introduce social change through the promotion of social justice as they perform their role as agents of social change in society. By advocating for the rights of vulnerable persons and groups, such as the disabled, the mentally ill, those imprisoned and persons suffering from HIV and AIDS, the social worker is helping to make the world a better place for these persons by improving their rewards, benefits and circumstances in the community.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The role of social workers and community service providers notably community psychologists has been proven to be necessary in the provision of social welfare to vulnerable populations in the Mezam community. It was recommended that social workers practicing in the Mezam community should devise strategies to improve the access and quality of the services they provide in terms of social welfare. This should be done through community outreach and the use of technological tools such as telephone and the internet to increase coverage and clientele in order to meet growing demand for their services exacerbated by the ravaging effects of Covid-19 and the Anglophone crisis that Mezam Division is currently facing. Private initiatives and international NGOs should recruit, train and make use of more social workers especially during this time of crises and emergencies where there is growing need. This would not only increase the number of social workers helping vulnerable persons in the community, but would equally improve the quality of service delivery. In addition, Government, through the Ministry of Social Affairs should re-open the training school for social workers in Yaoundé and spread its tentacles to the other regions of the country. This would enhance the training and employment of veritable professionals who can practice effectively in the best interest of social welfare promotion among vulnerable populations to meet the exigencies of growing demand in Mezam and in the country as a whole. Future researchers should therefore seek to ascertain

the role of social workers and community psychologists in other communities in Cameroon other than Mezam and should use quantitative or mixed methodologies to compare the findings against this one.

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