Is there a Role for Ubuntu Embedded in Social Work Practice— Particularly Relating to Migrants and Refugees?

Natalie Joubert *, Dr. Rachel J Freeman**

Abstract: Forced migration and displacement due to climate changes and environmental disasters is an international issue social workers are key players in ameliorating some of the distress that displaced persons' experience. This is often challenging, particularly if there are cultural divides between service providers and clients. Namibia and Finland both have populations of displaced individuals and both struggle with these same issues. Each however, has expertise which if shared could result in a new paradigm to address this problem. Well-developed services in Finland may lack recognition of culturally based emotional needs while community sensitive Namibian services can benefit from Nordic organizational experience. The University of Namibia Cares model and Finnish experience of increasing migrant populations are a potential nexus for collaboration. UBUNTU, an indigenous view of the individual in society, can be the platform underpinning discussion and mutual learning. Mental health, loneliness and children are key areas in both settings. Social workers who promote UBUNTU-based developmental community social work, potentially link both micro- and macro practices thereby addressing marginalization and exclusion of individuals, groups and communities, particularly in migrant and refugee populations. We performed a rigorous literature review of the following elements: migrants, displaced persons, UBUNTU, Social services in Namibia and Finland and acculturation. We present a discussion based on the evidence in the literature and the lived experience of migrants in the two countries. In this context weaddress community development through Social Work and bridging cultures through Ubuntu as a philosophy of social development. We reflect on the question whether there a place for Ubuntu in international, collaborative social work practice.

* Natalie Joubert is a Doctoral project researcher at the University of Eastern Finland Department of Social Sciences. The author can be reached at: natalie.joubert@uef.fi; ** Dr. Rachel J Freeman is a Social Scientist from the University of Namibia, is the Head of the Corporate Social Responsibility, Community Engagement Work Integrated Learning Project; UNAM

Cares, the Civic Mission of the University of Namibia. She received the University of Namibias's Faculty of Humanities and social Sciences Meritorious Award (2016).

Introduction : Ubuntu has been described "as a collection of values and practices that Africans view as making people an authentic human being who is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world" (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). Essentially, Ubuntu maintains that the person and their community are intrinsically linked and that individual well-being and community good cannot be separated. Although the concept of interdependency between person and community is not limited to Africa, the name "Ubuntu"designating an interwoven personal/societal attitude, traditional for centuries in African societies have achieved global interest. In fact, this positive paradigm of mutually supportive social and personal interaction is the international theme of the new Global Agenda (2020-2030) for Social Work (Social Development International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), 2020).We argue this recommendation that social workers implement the features of Ubuntu as recommended is feasible and that many elements are already in place in as divergently different settings such as Finland and Namibia.

Ubuntu as an approach for social protection to help the integration of migrant families in the context of refugees and migrants from sub-Saharan Africa to Namibia and Finland.

Both Namibia and Finland have recently experienced an influx of migrants, often as refugees. Many come from sub-Saharan Africa. In both countries, and the applicability of the Ubuntu concept to their integration is the subject of the discussion. Although the circumstances in both countries relating to the refugee problem (in Finland) and humanitarian crisis (in Namibia) are different, the responses needed are similar and the discussion will benefit from considering these through the lens of Ubuntu. In this article we will concentrate on this group of migrants as the concept relates naturally to this group of displaced persons because of their cultural background. Nevertheless, the traditional African approach of individual and societal interconnectedness that underpin the philosophy of Ubuntu should be applicable within a diverse range of cultural settings where social workers are active.

Refuge and safety, but significant challenges in adaptation

The Nordic countries have accepted far more migrants/refugees *per capita* compared to most European countries. (Gustafsson, 2021). Migrants, in particular African migrants, either as refugees or non-refugees, is a growing issue for Nordic countries needing urgent

attention(Inchley,2020).Many refugees come from sub-Saharan Africa, and despite financial support offered to refugees, the process adaptation into the new environment remains complex and challenging (Osman et al., 2016; Ansala et al., 2020). The trauma of the refugee trajectory subsequent entry into a very different society requires to be both understood. Where possible, the host country social services should appropriate and culturally sensitive(van Ee et al., 2016).The issue is that societal functioning in Nordic countries, even compared to more southern countries of Europe, is based largely on an *individual* approach as opposed to an *integrative community* one as is usual in African countries. Challenges, particularly for migrants and refugees from sub-Saharan Africa include changes in gender roles, linguistic competencies, and the adaptation to parenting practices in the host country (Joubert, 2021). The impact of the refugee experience is often submerged by the need for simple survival in a new country. Although Nordic host countries traditionally provide financial support, job seeking opportunities and children's education to migrants the emotional needs and those of parents, frequently remain unaddressed and unrecognised (Marlow, 2015;Joubert, 2021). It has become increasingly clearer that it is important to address the integration of migrants, particularly from sub-Saharan Africa into Nordic societies — with sensitive recognition of the social setting and the social attitudes of these migrants. Much of the traditional African attitude rests on the concept of Ubuntu. Social workers in Nordic countries, working with migrants may benefit of a sensitization of the to the concept of Ubuntu, which is so deeply ingrained in traditional sub-Saharan African societies. These service providers' understanding the Ubuntu background for the migrants, may enhance the positive integration of the latter into the host countries.

The Finnish Context: Since the 1990s, Finland has become increasingly a desirable host-country for asylum seekers and refugees. In recent years however, world-wide, refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria have increased substantially, and from the first country, increasing numbers. By 2015, foreign-born persons had already made up 6% of the Finnish population (Gustafsson, 2021). The Finnish government has a preference for accepting family units (Trevola, 2020). Most migrants are part of family units, emphasizing the need to focus on families in any attempt at successful integration.

The Namibian Context: In Namibia, the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant societal effect on a relatively small population. It has precipitated a humanitarian crisis, which in turn led to a response that exemplifies the Ubuntu philosophy. As of 26[th]August 2021, Namibia has reported 124 618 confirmed cases and 3370 deaths (MHSS,

2021). The Government of the Republic of Namibia has instituted measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, measures which adversely impacted on the economy and rendered many people jobless, in particular those working in the informal sectors (Freeman, 2021). Many migrants have become stranded in Namibia, as travel restrictions put in place to mitigate the spread of the pandemic have reduced options to return to their home countries. The Vice-Chancellor (VC) of the University of Namibia established UNAM *Cares*, a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Community Engagement project under the Office of the Vice-Chancellor in September 2019. This project enables UNAM staff, Students, Friends, Family, Alumni and other interested stakeholders to engage with the community through community development projects that help the vulnerable and less-privileged population groups. UNAM Cares works closely with communities, schools and other multi-sectoral stakeholders to provide a strategic platform for UNAM Staff and students to lead, plan and execute various community service projects that are aligned with our focus areas of – education, health awareness, environment, humanitarian aid, research and innovation. Through the direct assistance project, UNAM Cares assisted 250 stranded and vulnerable migrants with Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) assistance to their countries of origin in a safe and dignified manner, while ensuring observing the relevant public health protocols of respective governments. As part of pre-departure support, UNAM Cares provided non-food items to the returning migrants, such as transport, accommodation, masks, hand sanitizers and psychosocial and counseling services (Freeman, 2021). This response to the crisis created by the pandemic is underpinned by the Ubuntu values and, in practice demonstrates how these can be applied in a social work setting with good effect.

Important elements in migration that may be mitigated through the Ubuntu philosophy.

The following features of migration, particularly forced migration, are key to a targeted application of the Ubuntu principles. By themselves, they are recognized challenges and issues for migrants, but in the context of Ubuntu, there is added importance due to their potential mitigation by the philosophy.

The importance of pre-migratory experiences

Refugee levels of integration and adaptation depends on many factors, including pre-migration experiences, the departure process, the post-arrival experiences and environment. The impact of the migrant experience on interpersonal relationships inside the family —*pre-migration* is often dominated by the simple need for survival in a new country. Inevitably in

the process of settling, *new* problems such as family separation, language barriers, legal status, unemployment, homelessness, or lack of access to education and healthcare emerge. According to Berry& Sam (1997) integration can only be successfully pursued by migrants when the host society is open and inclusive in its orientation towards cultural diversity.

Integration is a complex two-way process

Settling in a new country as a migrant present both opportunities and challenges and while benefiting from the physical security offered by refugee status in the host country, presents new challenges of social identity, family and community roles emerge which potentially pose significant impediments for refugees to overcome in their attempt to integrate into the host society. The Nordic countries have made significant efforts to eliminate these barriers but, despite the financial and other support offered to migrant families, adaptation into the new environment remains a complex issue. The special philosophy of Ubuntu and the meaningful impact of community development initiatives could offer some points for consideration.The Finnish government's *Future of Migration 2020 Strategy* states that immigrants should be included to help build the future of the country as participants and active agents. They should not simply be a target for services and procedures. Immigration can be seen to enhance the wellbeing of the population and it supports Finland's competitiveness (Ministry of the Interior, 2013). Finnish legislation defines integration to be *an interactive development between immigrants and society,* providing immigrants the knowledge and skills required in that society, whilst maintaining their culture and language. The goal is that the individual participates in an integrated effective working life and becomes part of society. This integration is referred to in Finnish as *kotoutuminen* (Saukkonen, 2018) and the term indicates that Finland is aware and keen to enable integration. The key to this process is connectedness of the individual and the community, and in the context of Finland, the community includes the Finnish one as well as the migrant community.

Structural and psychological barriers in resettlement

Resettlement comes with many challenges. These invariably include radically different beliefs, social systems and values pertaining to the host country (Joubert, 2021). Newcomers not only deal with the disruption of migrating to a new country and adjusting to a different culture and lifestyle but face higher acculturation stress due to their contact with a different culture (Hebbani et al., 2012; Hooper et al., 2016; Kaukko & Wernesjö, 2017; Masoud et al., 2019).

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The effect of refugee status on children

Although data is limited, research indicates that refugee children face more obstacles than non-refugee children (Crul et al., 2016). The challenges not only include adjusting to a new language and culture but overcoming disrupted or minimal prior education, disruption to family networks and negative stereotypes (Crul et al., 2016; Bloch & Hirsch, 2017). These obstacles are compounded by factors such as traumatic events during their migratory journey (Trevola, 2020). Immigrant and refugee children may also face difficulties as they try to balance the cultural demands of their parents (Masoud et al., 2019). In the case of unaccompanied minors, additional challenges are due to separation from their families (Essomba, 2017).An example of parenting challenges is that of Somali refugee parents in Finland. The Nordic model and the Finnish environment tend towards an individual type of parenting, whereas the Somali refugees typically follow a collective type of parenting. This conflict in parenting style has impacted significantly on integration of Somalis into Finland (Degni et al., 2006).

Mental health disorders arising from the refugee experience

Migrants with refugee backgrounds have an increased prevalence of mental health disorders, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This is due to the cumulated anxiety from the trauma and hardships encountered during the pre-flight, flight and resettlement experiences (Fazel et al., 2005). Importantly, child and adolescent refugees— who account for more than half of the world's refugees — have a higher prevalence of mental disorders than non-refugee children and adolescents (Betancourt et al., 2020; Frounfelker et al., 2020). Parental psychosocial malfunctioning as a result of their experiences both pre- and post-migration can have a profound impact on child adjustment and, in fact, their subsequent development (Almqvist & Broberg, 2003; Strjik et al., 2011; Abraham et al., 2018; Brassell, 2018).

Transgenerational trauma and refugee families

Transgenerational trauma or the transmission of trauma symptoms and impairments from parent to child is common andhas been found to occur for up to three generations in a primary survivor's lineage (Dalgaard et al., 2017; Flanagan et al., 2020). It has been theorized that transgenerational trauma may be more pronounced and perpetuated particularly in refugee families —as opposed to other groups who have been exposed to trauma (Field, et al., 2013). Supporting this view, refugees tend to originate from populations that have been

subjected to generations of discrimination, poverty, and violence. This, in conjunction with the complexity of trauma encountered throughout the resettlement experience, results in the refugee being more susceptible to poorer mental health than other trauma populations (Field et al., 2013). Social environmental factors and the stress of asylum procedures frequently present significant barriers to social integration (Robjant et al., 2009; Berthold et al., 2019; Lee at al., 2020).

Entering the labour market

Only 13% of migrants to Finland come as labour migrants. In2015, 3,000 asylum seekers between age 16-18 arrived in Finland and of these, a total of 2,800 were unaccompanied minors. With limited language skills and poor education often coming from often war-ravaged countries, the chances for them to be employed are negligible (Sarvimäki, 2017). The Finnish government has given significant assistance, but migrants have twice that of normal Finnish school-leavers of *not* finding employment, engaging in education or training (the NEET situation) (Heikkilä, 2020). Somali migrants are among those with have the lowest employment rates in Finland (Heikkilä, 2020).

Loneliness and isolation amongst migrants resettling

In relation to loneliness and social isolation, migrants are amongst the most vulnerable groups that experiences it (Fazel et al., 2012; Silove et al., 2017; Bessaha et al., 2020). Once arriving in their host country, they face a completely different life in a strange new environment, combined with different government policies and resettlement challenges, loneliness and social isolation not only affecting their well-being with increased risk of mortality, but this also places pressure on social service and health systems. The literature on forced migration suggests that there are significant associations between loneliness, social isolation and high rates of pre-migration trauma and poor mental health amongst refugee populations (Sinnerbrink et al., 1997, Porter & Haslma, 2005, Bletscher, 2020).

Finland has made significant efforts to eliminate the barriers discussed above, but, despite the financial and other support offered to refugee families in Finland, effective adaptation into the new environment is not in all cases successful. These gaps and failures of successful integration, in what is essentially a social process has prompted how Finland to consider how it as a host coutry can learn from the attitude of Ubuntu, as an African concept, and use a model of community development that includes Nature.

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Discussion: Community psychosocial support is an important tool that assists in dealing with the challenges of resettling refugees. Community initiatives are based on empowerment approaches where individuals and groups act for themselves, achieve their goals to help themselves and others (Andersen, 2014). It focuses on individuals' strengths and resources and thereby supporting them to trust themselves and to act for themselves. Evidence from the literature highlights that community based psychosocial support is particularly beneficial for refugee populations to the collective nature of refugee trauma. The impact of trauma not only affects the individual, but also the family and community (Somasundaram, 2014). Studies show that community engagement not only improves refugees' mental health and wellbeing but also has a preventative effect (Betancourt, Frounfelker et.al., 2015; Cheng et al., 2015; Pejic et al., 2017). Peijic et al (2017) found that because refugees are from collective cultural backgrounds, community engagement is important for their well-being in the process of resettlement and adjustment in a new country. In their study with Somalian refugee families, utilizing the families' strengths through community engagement, improved their emotional health and wellbeing through community-based prevention and support (Pejic et al., 2016; 2017). The tenets of Ubuntu are largely related to support from the community.

Community based support not only reduces loneliness but has the potential to develop a sense of connectedness both within the refugee community and host community. In this context, refugee communities ideally identify their own needs and assist in the design and implementation of programs (Mitschke et al., 2013; Mahoney & Siyambalapitiya, 2017; Nocon et al., 2017; Slobodin et al., 2018; Calati et al., 2019; Bessaha et al., 2020). However, the basic Ubuntu concept of connection and support of individuals through the community hold. Stewart et al. (2012) highlights the use of peer support workers to increase social support for African women living in Canada whilst in Denmark, women's clubs have been used to address loneliness providing opportunities to immigrant women whilst being acquainted to the Danish society (Povlsen, 2012). Studies have also found the effectiveness of family-focused interventions that strengthen family resources through social support networks and community supports enabling families to protect their children from post-settlement challenges (Betancourt et al 2015). By focusing specifically on resettlement challenges family-focused interventions have been found to bolster the skills needed by migrants to navigate the host community and its resources (Pejic et al., 2017).

Social workers have, world-wide, a strong commitment to social justice and human rights. It is evident how social and economic equality can be promoted through developmental

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community social work. It links both micro and macro practices and addresses the marginalization and exclusion of individuals, groups and communities (Lombard, 2007; Midgley, 2010a). Self-determination, participation and partnerships are the core tenants of this approach and are important "tools" that social workers can apply with a human development approach to empower individuals and communities in voicing what they want their future to look like (Patel, 2005). There is however, a very intimate and personal approach that the Ubuntu concept introduces, an aspect which goes beyond what can be considered structured and "official" approaches that are enshrined in, for instance, the United Nations Charter. That is caring — an approach which brings an intensely personal aspect into play. Ubuntu is like the goodness of a mother caring for her child. It is that aspect which makes the philosophy special.

UNAM *Cares* is committed to serve diverse population groups in society, including migrants, the elderly, persons with comorbidities, persons with disabilities, inmates, orphans and vulnerable children and other interested multiple stakeholders. This project is led by one of the authors (RF), a senior lecturer in the Psychology and Social Work Department, assigned as Lead of UNAM *Cares* responsible for the overall coordination and supervision of the successful implementation of all UNAM *Cares* projects (Freeman, 2021).The objective of the six-months (December 2020 until May 2021) UNAM Cares project supported by IOM was to reduce the suffering of vulnerable migrants in Namibia through the provision of lifesaving and direct assistance. The key vulnerable groups were supported with voluntary return assistance which included, but was not limited to medical cases, female migrants, who were at greater risk of trafficking and abuse, including GBV and sexual violence, single mothers (pregnant or with babies), Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC), the elderly, as well as irregular migrants.UNAM *Cares* comes from Africa and has the characteristics of the Ubuntu philosophy embedded in its structure. The work done in Namibia by UNAM Cares has demonstrated its wide reach.

Migrant integration, and particularly when these migrants are refugees, is a complex and multidimensional process and refers to both inclusion and participation of migrants at social and economic levels. Migrant settlement policies at the national and local level influence migrant integration by shaping migrants' ability to participate socially and economically (Castles et al., 2002). The social work contact with migrants, particularly if underscored by the Ubuntu concept has potential to greatly support migrants and enhance integration.

Migrant populations are heterogenous with diverse social socio-political contexts that influence their capacity for integration which in turn contributes to experiences of loneliness and social isolation (Bletscher, 2020). Lee at al (2020) describe the concept of social isolation to be individual connection and disconnection from networks and the community level and state that being connected in wider community networks is important for access to social and economic opportunities. Despite migrants sustaining strong transnational networks, studies have highlighted those connections to the host community creates a sense of belonging in their host country that aids the integration process (Klok et al., 2017). A study in the US with Cambodian refugees found that there was a strong association between high levels of social isolation and poor mental health (Berthold et al., 2019). Challenges associated with resettlement, unaddressed high levels of PTSD and depression and change in gender roles affect family dynamics and relationships, also contribute to loneliness and social isolation and is associated with increased risk of suicide amongst refugee populations (Calati et al., 2019; Lee at al., 2020). In a study of newly arrived refugees from Syria, Eritrea, and Somalia to Sweden, showed that approximately 30% suffer from significant PTSD symptoms and one third from anxiety symptoms and poor psychological well-being (Tinghög, P., Arwidson, C. and Sigvardsdotter, E. et al., 2016). Studies in the Nordic countries have also highlighted factors such as lack of family and lack of access to local communities in affecting mental health wellbeing (Warfa et al., 2012, Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting, 2015; Shapiro, 2017). Chen et al. (2019) found that in Australia that despite refugees experiencing improved mental health once arriving, due to lack of resources and community networks, their mental health deteriorated over time.

The risk of loneliness and social isolation also pose increased risk particularly in the context of loss of spousal support and where there is a history of depression (Muruthi et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2017). However, community activities that involved 'co-ethnic incorporation' that promoted social interaction with the same culture had positive benefits (Caidi et al, 2020), and that is where Ubuntu as a concept of integration and connectedness could play an important role.

Conclusions: The International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) (2014) defines Social Work as a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change, development, social cohesion, empowerment and the liberation of people (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). Implicit in this definition are the elements of Ubuntu as described. However, despite these being implicit, the philosophy and approach of Ubuntu

needs to be brought more to the fore, as is being done with UNAM *Cares.*We conclude that using community development in social work to bridge cultures through Ubuntu as a philosophy of social development can strengthen the translation of social work theory into practice. The place of Ubuntu in international social work practice can enhance community work, practice ethics, research, policies and programmes. Ubuntu highlights the potential for connection and humaneness inherent in every aspect of human life and thus the article concludes with a reflective question on: Is there a place for Ubuntu in international social work practice? It is clear from the literature, that despite vast physical separation, with migrants and in particular refugees, the problems remain the same. What is important is the verbalization of that philosophy, so that it goes beyond a word or catch phrase and can be transferred, evaluated and tested in cultures different from the African one.

In summary, when Ubuntu is applied in community development it uses humane approaches to promote human rights, social justice and happiness in that community. The Ubuntu framework may therefore be useful in assessing and responding to migrants needs. This includes evaluating the effectiveness of social work intervention and response programmes to address the needs of the migrants, critically analyse interventions applied and promoting collaboration and participation in developing research strategies and ethical considerations in international social work practice which will address both the challenges but also implement the philosophy.

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