# The role of social workers in ameliorating the plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Nigeria

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## Abstract

*Internal displacement which is caused by natural and man-made disasters remains a global humanitarian challenge. There were about 3.3 million IDPs in 2014 scattered all over Nigeria in various camps and host communities. They face untold economic hardship, psychological trauma and social dislocation. To ameliorate their sufferings, social work intervention is required. The main objective of this paper therefore is to investigate the role of social workers in ameliorating the plight of IDPs in Nigeria. Anchoring on the theory of sufficiency of well-being and system theory, secondary sources were reviewed to collect data. Content analysis was employed to analyze the data. It was revealed that social workers in Nigeria have not been visible in assisting the IDPs and this is because the profession has not yet been recognized. Government has made efforts to address the plight of IDPs by providing camps but still they are facing severe socio-economic, health, security and environmental challenges therefore they require urgent attention of social workers to ensure that they turn to their normal lives and be re-integrated into the society. Also suggested is that Social Work Professionalization Bill should be passed into law to enable all concerned to see the need for the deployment of social work expertise in the rehabilitation of IDPs.*
*Key words: Economic insecurity, psychological trauma, social dislocation, social work intervention*


## Introduction

Internal displacement remains a global humanitarian challenge which affects many countries including Nigeria. Statistics show that there were about 3.3 million IDPs in 2014 scattered all over Nigeria in various camps and host communities. On a global scale, Nigeria is the third country with the highest number of IDPs after Syria with 6.5 million IDPs and Columbia with 5.7 million (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), 2014). Out of the 24 countries with the highest rates of displacement, 9 are from Africa and Nigeria has the highest internally displaced persons among these 9 African countries (IDMC, 2014, Oladeji, 2015, Eweka & Olusegun, 2016). This means that about 2% of Nigerian population have lost their homes, family life, means of livelihood and businesses (Oladeji, 2015). In Nigeria, Ad-hoc local

registration exercises have indicated the scale of displacement, although many people who sought shelter and support from families and friends were not counted. Internal displacement is caused by two main factors e.g. natural and man-made disasters. Natural disasters are climatic conditions, drought, erosions and famine (Ladan, 2013) while man-made disasters include armed conflicts and terrorism (NOIPolls, Social Welfare Network Initiative (SWNI) & Africare, 2015), social, economic (The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), 2015 cited in Itumo and Nwobashi, 2016, Ojo, 2016), political (Ewetan & Urhie, 2014, Fatile & Bello, 2015) and health factors (Oladeji, 2015).

The internally displaced persons (IDPs) are people who have fled their homes because of conflict and persecution based on religion, race, nationality, membership of a social group or political opinion but remain within their home countries' borders. They are citizens of a country who are displaced within the territory of that country as a result of natural disasters such as erosion, desertification, flooding etc. People can also be displaced as a result of human-caused disasters such as civil wars, internal armed conflicts, terrorism etc. In this situation, people are left with no option but to flee their homes for safety. The generally accepted definition of IDPs is that provided by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) (1998) and African Union Convention for Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention, 2009 cited in Obikaeze & Onuoha, 2016). They define IDPs as persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or

in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border. UNHCR (2006) avers that the term "homes or places of habitual residence" does not necessarily refer to a house or a building but can also designate land on which groups traditionally live or depend for their livelihoods, as in the case of nomads or pastoralists. There are two components of this definition which are coercive or involuntary migration and movement within national borders (Durosaro and Ajiboye, 2011). The first component (coercive or involuntary migration) distinguishes IDPs from individuals who voluntarily migrate to other parts of their countries in search of better living conditions, employment opportunities, education etc. (UNHCR, 2006). The second element of the definition distinguishes IDPs from refugees. A refugee is defined as a person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality or habitual residence, and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country (UNHCR, 2006). A refugee is an emigrant who left his/her country to another for fear of persecution or otherwise. Since IDPs remain legally under the protection of national authorities of their habitual residence, unlike refugees who have been deprived of the protection of their states or countries of origin, they are expected to enjoy the same rights as the rest of the population who are not displaced (Durosaro & Ajiboye, 2011). UNHCR (2006) affirms that this IDP definition is a descriptive

definition rather than a legal definition. It simply describes the factual situation of a person being uprooted within his/her country of habitual residence. It does not confer a special legal status or rights in the same way that recognition as a refugee does. This is not necessary for IDPs because, unlike refugees who require a special legal status as a result of being outside their countries and without its protection, IDPs remain entitled to all the rights and guarantees as citizens and other habitual residents of a particular State (UNHCR, 2006). However, both categories of displaced persons often face similar risks and deprivations in other respects.

Records have demonstrated that IDPs suffer emotional, psychological and economic problems, food and water insecurity, social dislocation and diseases (Fatile and Bello, 2015, Oladeji, 2015, Marama, 2016, Lenshie & Yenda, 2016, Itumo & Nwobashi, 2016, Ajiboye, 2016). According to human security perspective (Muguruza and De La Cruz, 2011), displacement is a situation where the victims face untold economic hardship, psychological trauma and social dislocation as these can lead to development of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, fear and so on. For instance, victims of Boko Haram insurgency live in perpetual fear that the insurgents may return to their communities, making them to relocate. Also, there is incidence of severe mental anguish affecting individuals' lives and communities long after the war or disaster has ended, causing continuing instability (Oladeji, 2015).

On the hand, social work is a helping profession with the main goal of improving a society's overall well-being, especially for the most vulnerable populations like IDPs. Social work is both an academic discipline and a profession that supports individuals, groups, and communities in a changing society and creates social conditions favourable to the wellbeing of people and society. It is a profession that seeks to enhance the coping capacities of groups in the society. The International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (2014) and the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) (2014) define social work as a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels (IFSW, 2014)

Suppes and Wells (cited in Clemons, 2014) call social work a unique profession because it has dual focus of person and environment, it is based on strengths perspective in approaching the work and it has code of ethics which states that "the primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. Clemons (2014) believes that these three reasons are what contribute to social work having so much to offer in primary social work settings and in secondary settings where a social worker's presence is a complementation to the professional team. Secondary settings include medical, educational, geriatric,

rehabilitation, criminal justice, substance abuse, mental health and a broad array of other settings.

Many studies have been carried out on the factors of internal displacement, plight of IDPs etc. but very few (if any) have been conducted on the role of social workers in alleviating the sufferings of the IDPs particularly in Nigeria. The main objective of this study therefore was to investigate the role of social workers in ameliorating the plight of IDPs in Nigeria and to proffer solutions. Therefore, the questions that begged for answers in this study are:

- What is the role of social workers in ameliorating the plight of IDPs in Nigeria?
- What could be done to get social workers involved in providing succor to the IDPs?

From the foregoing, it becomes pertinent to present two theories that explicate the need for the role of social workers in ameliorating the plight of IDPs. The theory of sufficiency of well-being proposed by Powers and Faden (cited in Clarinval & Hunt, 2014) helps to draw attention to the wide range of features that contribute to a minimum level of well-being for displaced persons. This multi-disciplinary theory, which derives from social justice and public health perspectives, focuses attention on social justice concerns beyond the provision of mere elementary physical needs. According to Powers and Faden (cited in Clarinval & Hunt, 2014), justice requires that a minimally sufficient level of well-being be secured for individuals who are systematically disadvantaged. This conception of social justice can help to direct attention to diverse dimensions of well-being such as health, personal security, reasoning, self-determination, respect and attachment and orient programme planning in situations where social workers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) work with internally displaced populations after the acute crisis of the disaster response. Powers and Faden's sufficiency theory is intuitively attractive as a theory that could be used to explain the situation faced by IDPs and why IDPs need social work interventions. It relates to theory of human rights (universal moral rights that presumably should be legal rights). Its relevance is to the extent that it harps on basic "decent" life which relates to reasonably long, safe and secure living with respect accorded one when one uses reasoning, feeling and attachment capacities. This is in tandem with the concerns of social workers whose role helps to promote individuals and collective wellbeing in order to improve or enhance their social functioning. The point here is that social workers believe most strongly that every person who lives, at all, should have this basic 'decent' life, the denial of which, as in the case of IDPs in Nigeria, requires an urgent interrogation and amelioration. IDPs, particularly those living for extended periods of time in camps, will benefit from programmes that are designed to assist individuals achieve sufficient levels of well-being whilst having their basic needs met. Addressing the health, personal security, reasoning, self-determination, respect and attachment of well-being will promote the goal that IDPs are able to live minimally decent lives during displacement and upon return to their homes. Powers and Faden's theory provides a useful conceptual account of the range of considerations that are pertinent for IDPs in the post acute disaster phase, including attention to diverse facets of well-being and identification

of cascading effects between them and concern for systematic disadvantage.

The System Theory by Ludwig von Bertatanffy (1968) offers an insight in explaining the situation with IDPs in Nigeria. Fundamentally, the theory teaches us that all parts of the system are connected and what happens in one part of the system will have an effect on all other parts of the system. It also posits not just that individuals are inter-linked within families but also that families are inter-linked in communities that are in turn inter-linked with classes, ethnic groups and cultures and with larger society. The IDPs are made up of various individuals from various families, classes, communities, ethnic groups and cultures in Nigeria. In a normal situation, Nigerian families, when they function optimally, are said to achieve synergy; that is to say, the combined healthy functioning of every family will make Nigeria function optimally thereby contributing to social cohesion and national development. This is only possible when in normal times; there are interactions and interrelations between the individuals in the family as well as among families, groups, organizations or communities. The interactions and interrelations between the systems suggest constant motion, fluidity and change which is characteristic of the system theory. It should be noted, therefore that a change or disruption in movement of one part of the system or some systems will have an impact on the large complex Nigerian society as well. Therefore, the IDPs in their fears, state of helplessness, psychological trauma, abuse of their fundamental human rights and social injustice meted out on them, are not expected to function optimally. In such situations, they become out of joint with the society. The negative experiences they pass through in their camps cannot make for sound interactions, interrelations and optimal functioning in the larger Nigerian society unless there are appropriate social work rehabilitation programmes which will provide adequate capacity for their re-adaptation for national development.

These two theories are germane to this paper. While the theory of sufficiency of well-being stresses the security of the IDPs, the system theory emphasizes social cohesion. System theory provides that the IDPs are citizens of Nigeria and should perform optimally in order to maintain social cohesion and contribute to national development. Secondly, based on the system theory, social workers will be able to handle the psychosocial needs of the individual IDPs in order to promote their development.

**Methods**

The research is a literature based project. This implies that data were generated from secondary sources like journals, text books, internet sources, newspapers, monographs etc. The study drew together and re-analysed qualitative literature to discuss the plight of IDPs and the role of social workers in alleviating the sufferings of IDPs in Nigeria. A literature search is defined as a systematic and thorough search of all types of published literature in order to identify as many items as possible that are relevant to a particular topic (Gash, 2000). Anchoring on the system theory and the theory of sufficiency of wellbeing by Powers and Faden, secondary data were reviewed to collect data. Content analysis was employed to analyse the data.

**Results and Discussion**

The results of the literature research on the plight of IDPs and the role of social workers are presented in this section. The research revealed that displaced families suffered from untold economic hardship as their means of livelihood were abated with so much deprivation (Lenshie & Yenda, 2016; Itumo & Nwobashi, 2016). It was further revealed that the IDPs not only suffered loss of means of their livelihood such as agriculture and trade but also faced joblessness (Itumo & Nwobashi, 2016). IDPs experienced food insecurity and malnutrition as a result of loss of their livelihoods and economic activities. The study further showed that food insecurity and malnutrition had compelled many of IDPs to look beyond IDP camps for survival. Closely related to the food insecurity is acute water supply shortage to the IDP camps (Lenshie & Yenda, 2016).

The study further indicated that many IDPs lived in crowded and unhealthy environment in the camps (Itumo & Nwobashi, 2016). IDPs do not have access to electricity, hygienic toilets and safe cooking facilities (Ajiboye, 2016). The result revealed that internal displacement could lead to the development of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Oladeji, 2015). Many IDPs and other civilians affected by war suffered psychosocial consequences of the crisis (Oladeji, 2015). Many suffered severe mental distress caused by traumatic experiences of having witnessed or being subjected to gross violations of human rights such as killings, torture, sexual violence, family separation and displacement from home (Oladeji, 2015). For communities hosting large concentrations of IDPs, the study found that the additional caseloads for local health facilities had placed the health system under severe strain (Fatile

and Bello, 2015). Outbreaks of diseases had increased in areas affected by displacement (Oladeji, 2015). Increase in rape, pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and prostitution in most of the IDPs camps across Borno was also reported (Marama, 2016). It was further reported that many IDPs might have been infected with HIV because condoms were not made available to them. Poor hygiene and inadequate provisions accounted for much of the ill health of displaced persons. Further results indicated that the level of insecurity in the camps in Nigeria was alarming (Adimula, 2016 cited in Nsude & Nwanchor, 2017). It is a situation of running from insecurity to insecurity and that of double jeopardy. Furthermore, it was reported that some criminals were admitted into some of the camps due to inadequate profiling and this is posing real threats to the inmates.

With regards to the role of social workers in alleviating the sufferings of IDPs, the study found that professional social work fostered social change, social development and social cohesion as well as the empowerment and liberation of individuals (IFSW General Meeting and IASSW General Assembly, 2014). Principles such as social justice, human rights, societal responsibility and respect for diversity are elementary in social work. Social work assists people in meeting the challenges of life by applying a variety of scientific methods and theories. It was revealed that one of the contemporary challenges facing the Nigerian state was how to provide succour to the plight of the IDPs, occasioned by incessant violent attacks perpetrated by the Boko Haram insurgents in north eastern part of the country (Itumo & Nwobashi, 2016). Notwithstanding the several efforts made by government to address the plight of IDPs by providing camps,

the IDPs are still facing severe socio-economic, health and environmental challenges as indicated above. This situation in some occasions forced the IDPs to even flee the camps for their safety, an action that worsens their predicaments. In this regard, they need the assistance of the government and other humanitarian groups including social workers that could intervene to cushion the effects of hardship in order to bring succour to the IDPs. The system theory stresses that different individuals, groups, organizations, or communities constitute a whole, Nigeria. IDPs are made up of men, women and children who are also citizens of Nigeria. If not assisted to overcome the challenges of being internally displaced, they will not be able to contribute to the national development and may become maladjusted that will threaten the social cohesion of the country. For instance, it was estimated that 55.7% of the IDP population were children and 28.1% were 5 years old or younger (Internal Organization for Migration (IOM), 2015). Nearly half of the people impacted by conflict are under the age of 18 years (Oladeji, 2015). Records show that about 10.5 million children were out of school in 2011 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2011). This number has increased due to internal displacement particularly in the north east region where most schools were closed and are occupied by the IDPs. If these young IDPs are not well rehabilitated and reformed, their future will be bleak. They will have poor jobs, low earnings potentials, no access to wealth producing assets, poor health outcomes, vulnerability to crimes, circulation of uneducated population etc.

The system theory views individuals as actively involved with their environments,

capable of adaptation and change. It also views systems as goal oriented, supporting client's self determination and the client's participation in the change process. As systems require constant transactions with each other to survive, social workers' purpose will be to provide and maintain opportunities for transactions for all populations and to work to reduce isolation of individuals and systems. It is therefore imperative here to discuss social workers and their roles as professionals. Social workers are social engineers and they enhance the proper functioning of individuals, households, communities and nations. A good social worker is that professional who has the ability to actively listen to clients; counsel clients who are experiencing heightened emotions, exhibit a strong sense of empathy, hold insightful and meaningful dialogue, and possess a high level of ethical awareness and responsibility. Perhaps most importantly, social workers must be advocates for others. They are empathetic, patient, dependable, organized, perceptive, persistent, flexible, resilient and driven. According to Johnson (2015) a social worker is characterized by flexibility, creativity, passion, empathy, trustworthiness, competence and sense of humour.

Popple and Leighninger (2011 cited in NASW Assurance Services, 2015) posit that social workers perform seven critical functions. According to them, social workers must first engage the client in early meetings to promote a collaborative relationship; collect and assess data that will guide and direct a plan of action to help the client; negotiate and formulate an action plan; implement, promote resource acquisition and enhance role performance; monitor and evaluation on-going documentation through short-term goal attainment of the extent to which client is

following through; provide supportive counselling by affirming, challenging, encouraging, informing, and exploring options and finally, gradually disengage from the relationship by seeking to replace himself/herself with a naturally occurring resource.

From ecological system perspective, Pardeck (1988) identifies six distinct professional roles that will allow social workers to work effectively with five basic client systems such as the individual, the family, the small group, the organization, and the community. In these six professional roles, social workers serve as conferees, enablers, brokers, mediators, advocates and guardians. As conferees, social workers serve as the primary sources of assistance to the clients in problem solving. The enabler role focuses on actions taken when social workers structure, arrange, and manipulate events, interactions, and environmental variables to facilitate and enhance system functioning. Broker role is actions taken when the practitioner's object is to link the consumer with goods and services or to control the quality of those goods and services. As mediators, social workers try to reconcile opposing or disparate points of views and to bring the contestants together in united action. Social workers, as advocates, secure services or resources on behalf of the clients in the face of identified resistance or develop resources or services in cases where they are inadequate or non-existent. Advocacy role of social workers will help this group of people by enhancing their individual and collective wellbeing and helping them in the areas of social justice and human rights. As guardians, social workers participate in a social control function or they take protective actions when their clients' competency levels are deemed inadequate. These six roles are found to be very germane to the amelioration of the plight of the IDPs by social workers.

However, this study revealed that social workers have not been involved in alleviating the sufferings of the IDPs and this is because social work as a profession has not been recognized in Nigeria. AllAfrica.com in *This Day* newspaper (2015) points out that in most developed countries, social work is an institutionalised instrument of the state to facilitate social and economic progress. The underlying philosophy of social work is that government must create a better environment, where every individual, regardless of economic or social factors, can have the opportunity to maximise his/her potential. However, social workers in Nigeria have not been visible in assisting the IDPs due to its non-recognition. Government is not supporting and recognising social workers. Unlike in the UK, the title "Social Worker" is protected by law (under Section 61 Care Standards Act 2000) and only those who have undergone approved training at university either through a Bachelor or Master's degree in Social Work and are registered with the appropriate Professional Regulatory Bodies may practice social work and be called social workers (AllAfrica.com, 2015). To do so otherwise is a criminal offence. On the contrary, social workers in Nigeria are not even protected by law, and their jobs can be done by even untrained persons. Remarkably, IFSW (2012) considers that the role of social workers working with and for displaced populations should be that of:

- Investigators: Social workers should investigate into the political and socio-cultural causes leading to internal displacement, the particular aspects of displacement and its impact on the

receiving population and region, the characteristics and conditions of displaced individuals and their potentials for development;

▪ Participants: Social workers should participate in the design and formulation of preventive, remedial and developmental policies and programmes for displaced populations, taking into account, wherever possible, the complexities and particularities of each displacement, including viewing them from a gender perspective;

▪ Social managers: They should be managers with administrative functions in projects and programmes within a framework that encourages the participation of population groups directly and indirectly involved in the displacement;

▪ Analysts: Social workers should analyse a wide range of social processes related to power structures, social conflicts, civil coexistence, family and community dynamics, mediation between the State and civil society, and the impact of public policies and social security and social service systems;

▪ Evaluators: Social workers should evaluate projects on the basis of a quantitative and qualitative analysis of goal achievements and responses to the needs of the population;

▪ Specialists: Social workers should specialise in human and family problems caused by displacement with the capacity to enhance displaced persons' inner resources directed towards development such as group, individual, and family counseling, cognitive behavioral therapy, and

learning relaxation techniques, as well as a psychosocial education of the host community.

▪ Social educators: Social workers should be able to convey information on the rights of displaced persons and services available to them, to assess organisation and mobilisation processes, and to act as trainers and motivators for social participation aimed at developing democratic relations;

▪ Conflict mediators: Social workers should mediate in conflicts with the ability to lead, summon parties and negotiate, and a give-and-take strategy to reach decisions beneficial to all;

▪ Agents: Social workers should be agents for strategic alliances among organisations, groups and institutions to achieve the optimal utilization of available resources, the highest potential for actions directed at the displacement phenomenon and to facilitate the necessary monitoring of these processes.

All these functions are very necessary for ameliorating the plight of IDPs and therefore social workers should be engaged in providing succour and assistance for the IDPs without delay.

**Conclusion**

Government has made efforts to address the plight of IDPs by providing camps but still they are facing severe socio-economic, health, security and environmental challenges therefore they require urgent attention of social workers to ensure that they turn to their normal lives and be re-integrated into the society. Therefore, the paper argues that IDPs must become a central focus for social workers as

their roles are highly needed to reduce the IDPs' fears, helplessness, psychological trauma and getting social justice to their abused basic human rights.

## Recommendations

The paper recommends the use of social work services for IDPs for the purposes of urgently helping in ameliorating their living conditions, serving as mediators between them and the government and helping in accessing and linking them to community resources as well as rendering case management This is because, as obtains in advanced countries, their training prepares them to understand the peculiar multi-faceted problems faced by the IDPs and to proffer best solutions for their plight within the limits of available resources. Also suggested is that Social Work Professionalization Bill in Nigeria should be passed into law to enable all concerned to see the need for the deployment of social work expertise in the rehabilitation of IDPs because if not appropriately rehabilitated and integrated into the society, they will pose challenges to national development.

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**COMPETING INTERESTS**

To the best of our knowledge, there is no competing interest.

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