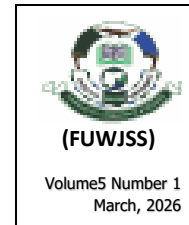


EDUCATORS' AND PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVES ON INVOLVEMENT OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN NIGERIA'S DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES



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Abstract

Globally, the involvement of professionally qualified social workers in development programmes is significant to achieving sustainable development. Since independence in 1960, successive Nigerian governments have established various development programmes to eradicate poverty. The study argues that sustainable development has not yet been achieved in Nigeria due to the limited involvement of qualified social workers. Thus, the study used a qualitative research design, utilising purposive and snowball sampling techniques which involves 19 in-depth interview (IDI) participants from Ilorin and Asaba towns in Nigeria. The study's findings revealed that the involvement of social workers is relevant to attaining sustainability in Nigeria's development programmes. Despite the relevance, participants indicated a low participation of social workers due to many critical challenges, including unspecified role of social workers resulting in the involvement of non-social work graduates playing the role of social workers, inadequate funding, a low presence of social workers at the macro/policy level of practice, a lack of autonomous regulatory body, and inadequate political will to execute sustainable programmes. In response to these challenges, the study identified strategies for adequate involvement of social workers in Nigeria. It recommends the establishment of an autonomous social work regulatory body, the formulation of adequate development policies that prioritise poverty eradication programmes, and the proper involvement of social workers for effective practice and sustainability in Nigerian development programmes.

Keywords: Nigeria, development programmes, sustainable development, social work educators, social work practitioners, social work

Introduction

Globally, the involvement of professionally qualified social workers in development programmes is paramount to achieving sustainable

development. The role of social work in policy formulation and social development processes enhances active participation of target beneficiaries in decision-making, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, and improves service users' accessibility to programme outcomes. The role of social workers is underscored in the profession's definition, principles, objectives, values, and ethics. The International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers (IASSW & IFSW) (2014) described social work as:

a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change, development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversity are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, the social sciences, the humanities, and Indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being.

In addition, African social work, which predated IASSW and IFSW (2014), could be described as an informal practice based on Indigenous knowledge of collective well-being, acquired, developed over time, institutionalised, and passed from generation to generation. It specified how people solve individual and social issues themselves, reflecting all culturally relevant factors, and are strengthened by blood ties or marriage to provide food, social services, development programmes for the good of the collective, and control over their lives (Veta, 2012). The role of African social work was culturally ascribed and optimally utilised for sustainable outcomes; with no professional code of ethics, their overarching philosophy was premised on service to humanity through the lens of collective responsibility as a precondition for communal well-being and social development (Amadasun, 2020). African societies, like societies across the world, practiced social work from time immemorial; they had inclusive and sustainable Indigenous care methods for developing communities and protecting and caring for the vulnerable (Chitereka, 2009). African societies focused on communal, kinship, family, and marriage systems to succour the destitute, low-income, and mentally ill (Kakowa, 2016; Mugumbate & Bohwasi, 2021; Okoye, 2013; Rankopo et al., 2021). African support systems for the well-being of individuals, families, and groups in need are rooted in a long history of social cohesion. This social cohesiveness ensured that vulnerable groups, such as older adults, orphans, people with disabilities, and widows, were provided for, relatives offered children to barren couples, and there were no social problems in the African societies (Eno et al., 2022; Ramsey-Soroghaie, 2021; Twikirize & Spitzer, 2022; Wairire, 2014). Community development programmes, e.g., constructing houses, health facilities,

roads, and open wells, were carried out through communal efforts (Mabvurira & Nyarungu, 2013; Veta, 2012).

However, in the late 19th Century, the colonialists invaded African societies, introducing social problems such as oppression, domination, exploration and exploitation, slavery, urbanisation, and individualism through the activities of Christian missionaries based on the teaching of Christ on charity and community service (Mbah et al., 2017). The introduction of urbanisation came with its attendant social problems, rampant poverty, and the attempts of the African colonial powers (Britain, France, Portugal, and Germany) to ameliorate these effects and to retain their grip on power, which saw the introduction of formal social work education in Africa (Veta & McLaughlin, 2023). In other words, the African social support systems were abandoned, and social services were delivered by colonialist quacks/non-social work graduates to ameliorate the social problems brought about by colonisation to African societies. According to Obeten et al. (2020), the activities of the colonialists in Nigerian societies between 1914 and 1960 were a period of political and socio-economic exploitation (colonial imperialism).

Furthermore, the forceful amalgamation of the Nigerian societies in the year 1914 into Nigeria as a nation further introduced social problems, including political, religious, and ethnic sentiments that plunged the country into civil war from 1967 to 1970. The aftermath of the Nigerian civil war, i.e., widowhood, mass poverty, malnutrition, orphans, hunger, inter-ethnic discrimination, prostitution, political conflicts, drug use, armed robbery, corruption, religious discrimination, and child abandonment, necessitated the need for professionally qualified social workers in Nigeria. The need for professionally qualified social workers for curative practice resulted in the training of the first Nigerian social workers, with a university education, in the West, and others with a secondary school educational/diploma qualifications and 3–6 months in-service training in social welfare administration (Gray & Amadasun, 2024; Mbah et al., 2017).

The quest for a more curative and proactive social work education and practice in Nigeria led to the establishment of social work institutions and university programmes such as the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1976, the University of Benin in 1979, Federal School of Social Work, Emene, Enugu State, in 1982, and the University of Jos in the 90s (Mbah et al., 2017; Okoye, 2013). In addition, the Nigerian Association of Social Workers (NASOWS), dominated by non-social work graduates, the Association of Medical Social Workers of Nigeria (AMSWON), and, later, the Nigerian Association of Social Work Educators (NASWE), were formed (Mbah et al., 2017; Okoye, 2013; Veta & McLaughlin, 2023). A

total of 15 Nigerian Universities and colleges now offer social work programmes at various levels (Gray & Amadasun, 2024), and more are poised to introduce the programme following its professionalisation, as the Nigerian Council of Social Work (Establishment) Bill 2017 (Social Work Bill) was passed in 2023.

Social workers provide various services at different levels (micro, mezzo, and macro), including psychiatry, medical, schools, rehabilitation, corrections, child welfare, family welfare, judiciary, communities, policy, industries, administration, armed forces, teaching, and research (Mupedziswa, 2020). Social workers are potential change agents capable of transforming the lives of vulnerable populations worldwide, including Africa. The transformation is achieved through actively and creatively participating in policy formulation, advocacy, and practice that promote social justice at the centre of development for the social functioning of marginalised individuals in society (Manyama, 2018; Nozipho & Mpumelelo, 2026). The social work profession has the potential to address social development problems not only in Nigeria but across the African continent (Amadasun, 2020).

Despite the profession's core mandate and relevance in Africa, social work faces significant challenges that have slowed the pace of its practice and its contributions to the effective formulation and implementation of African development policies for sustainable development. Odalonu (2022) and Magaji et al. (2025) argued that in Africa, the political elites have no intention of redistributing income and wealth to eradicate mass poverty, and as such, social services are delivered as palliatives and a means of camouflaging the material basis of deprivation. Reese (2011) found that social workers often struggle to claim their role, and their capacities are frequently inadequately utilised in professional palliative care delivery in Africa. Inadequate transport and communication facilities in rural areas where the bulk of the population lives, limited resources, inadequate policy environments, and the need for more robust institutional support remain significant barriers to the full realisation of social work objectives in Africa (Schmid et al., 2022).

However, the Nigerian government, realising the significance of social welfare for its citizens, has established several development programmes since 1960 by successive civilian and military governments, beginning with the National Development plans, which have not yielded desired results (Akhimien et al., 2014). Other Nigerian development initiatives, e.g., National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), Primary Health Care Programmes (PHCP), and National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) were planned and executed based on orientations and modernisation theories that were inherited from the

colonial masters, focusing on an urbanisation approach. Most development programmes are poorly implemented, and the targeted beneficiaries rarely benefit due to corruption by government officials (Johnson & Ifeoma, 2018). In attempt to resolve the issues of failed development programmes, scholars have investigated the challenges and effects of rural development programmes, and public perceptions of social workers in Nigeria (Akhimien et al., 2017; Amadasun, 2020; Lamidi & Igbokwe, 2021; Obeten et al., 2020; Ofem et al., 2021). To date, no large-scale studies have examined social workers' perspectives on the level of their involvement in development programmes in Nigeria. To fill this knowledge gap, this study explores educators' and practitioners' perspectives on social workers' involvement in development programmes and discusses the implications for social work in Nigeria. Specifically, this study seeks to examine the role of social workers in development programmes; identify the level of social workers' involvement in Nigerian development programmes; explore the challenges hindering social workers' adequate involvement in Nigeria.

An Overview of Nigerian Social Development Landscape

In Nigeria, social development programmes have been prioritized by successive governments since 1960 (Emeh et al., 2012; Owasa & Onimisi, 2021). Social These programmes encompass a wide range of initiatives aimed at addressing social challenges and promoting sustainable development (Ezeudu & Umaru, 2023). Social development programmes target various sectors, involve multiple stakeholders, and address key areas including poverty reduction, education, healthcare, gender equality, social protection, and community development (Ezeudu & Umaru, 2023). The prioritization of social development /programmes/efforts in Nigeria was due to the activities of non-governmental organisations and protests against military regimes by civil society organizations from 1966 to 1999 (Wawira & Were, 2019). The efforts to mobilize community members to participate in social development programmes, beginning with the National Development Plans of 1955-1960, could not achieve any laudable results and needed to be revised (Akhimien et al., 2017).

The social development programmes established by the Nigerian governments include the National Accelerated Food Production Programme (NAFPP), River-Basin Development Authority (RBDA), Agricultural Development Programme (ADP), Directorate for Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), and National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP). Successive Nigerian governments scrapped most of those social development programmes, while others are yet to attain the

needed sustainability in their outcomes due to low or non-participation of target beneficiaries. Systemic corruption, lack of stakeholders' participation, inadequate information, ineffective community development policies, and low transparency and accountability are significant causes of unsustainability in Nigerian development programmes (Johnson & Ifeoma, 2018; Wawira & Were, 2019).

The United Nations introduced foreign aid for social development programmes in the 1980s and 1990s. This introduction led to foreign aid dependency, and beneficiary countries, including Nigeria, did not use the funds to address community needs; as such, the programmes executed did not survive beyond the exit of donors despite the enormous amount of money spent on their implementation (Kinyata & Abiodun, 2020). For instance, DFRRI in Nigeria constructed roads and provided boreholes water, rural electrification, and low-cost housing that were yet to attain sustainability due to non- and low community participation (Kinyata & Abiodun, 2020). Furthermore, Anam (2024) revealed that the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), the Seven-Point Agenda, the Transformation Agenda, the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP), and the National Development Plan (2021–2025) are faced with fragmented implementation, under-resourced, and weakened institutional and political inconsistencies. Most Nigerian social policies and programmes including Operation Feed the Nation, Green Revolution, National Poverty Eradication Program, National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Peoples Bank Project, Better Life for Rural Women, Family Economic Advancement Program (FEAP), Poverty Alleviation Program (PAP), and Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Program (SURE-P) have been initiated, executed, and theories propounded, yet, these social programmes seemed to have served the interest of the political elites and their cronies with a low target beneficiaries' active participation and accessibility to intended social service outcomes in Nigeria (Ering et al., 2014; Odalonu, 2022).

Research Methodology

This study utilised a qualitative research design. Qualitative designs aim to explain, describe, and interpret a phenomenon among a subset of a population (Crossman, 2020). This study adopted an exploratory approach grounded in participants' lived experiences (Kalof et al., 2008) to provide a comprehensive and deeper understanding of social work educators' and practitioners' views on social workers' involvement in Nigerian development programmes (Bless & Higson-Smith, 1995). The design allowed participants to express themselves in their own terms on issues raised about the phenomenon under study.

The researcher conducted the study in the Ilorin and Asaba Metropolises of Nigeria. Ilorin Metropolis is the headquarters of Kwara State in the North-central geopolitical zone of Nigeria, and it hosts the University of Ilorin, which has a full-fledged Department of Social Work offering undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Asaba Metropolis is the headquarters of Delta State in the South-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria, and it hosts many ministries, including the Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, and Social Development. In addition, Asaba Metropolis hosts Dennis Osadebe University, Delta State, which has yet to offer social work programmes.

The study used purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The study purposefully included the University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria, and the Departments of Social Welfare and Community Development, Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, and Social Development, Asaba, Delta State, four social work educators (SWEs), six senior social welfare officers (SSWOs), and six senior community development officers (SCDOs). In addition, the snowball technique was used to recruit three unemployed social work graduates. The total sample size was 19, which the study considered sufficient. Prolonged interviews with up to 10 participants constitute an adequate sample size for a phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The inclusion criteria required that SWEs have taught social work courses for at least 2 years, that SSWOs and SCDOs have been in their positions for at least 2 years, and that the social work graduates have been unemployed for at least 3 years after graduation. These inclusion criteria enabled the investigator to elicit rich, knowledgeable data for this study.

The University of Ilorin Ethical Review Committee approved this study, and the Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, and Social Development, Delta State, granted gatekeeper ethical approval. The researcher notified the participants that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time and have their data deleted. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and participants provided informed consent to participate in the study.

The study used an unstructured in-depth interview (IDI) guide for data collection. This research instrument allowed the participants to share their lived experiences freely about the involvement of social workers in Nigerian development programmes. The IDI guide comprised five main open-ended questions, followed by probes to elicit rich, detailed opinions from participants about the phenomenon under study. The key question was: Can you tell us about your experiences with social workers in Nigerian development programmes? (This was aimed at initiating discussion with participants about their lived experiences and opinions on

social workers' involvement in Nigeria). What are the roles of social workers in Nigerian development programmes? Can we discuss the level of social workers' participation in Nigerian development programmes? What are the challenges, if any, hindering a high level of involvement of social workers in Nigeria? How can a high level of social workers' participation in Nigerian development programmes be effectively achieved? The interview sessions were conducted face-to-face with each participant in their homes, at times mutually and conveniently arranged, ensuring stressless and distraction-free settings. As such, the participants were not incentivised. Each interview session lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. To ensure adequate coverage and retention of the gathered data (Lofland & Lofland, 1999), the researcher took field notes and tape-recorded the interviews with participants' permission. The data were securely stored on a password-protected computer to ensure optimal confidentiality.

The study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide to conducting thematic analysis, which comprises familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The investigator immersed himself in the data by repeatedly playing back the audiotapes and carefully studying the field notes for familiarisation and transcription into English. Thereafter, the researcher checked the transcripts back against the original audiotapes and field notes for accuracy. During manual analysis, the investigator generated initial codes, collated coded data into tables, and grouped codes into potential themes. The investigator reviewed the collated extracts from the entire data set for each theme to ensure a coherent pattern and identified the coded categories, interpreting and assigning them to overarching themes relevant to the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, the researcher defined and named four core themes that underpin the report. In the results section, the participants ($n = 19$) are assigned pseudonyms, SWE, SSWO, SCDO, and UESG, representing social work educator, senior social welfare officer, senior community development officer, and unemployed social work graduate, respectively, for identification and anonymity.

Findings and Discussions

The first theme describes the relevance and perceived functions of social workers in Nigerian development programmes. The second theme highlights the perceived level of involvement and challenges facing social workers in Nigeria, and the final theme explores strategies for more effectively achieving a high level of social workers' participation in Nigerian development programmes. Examples of topical quotes that addressed the study objectives were extracted from the thematic clusters to support the findings and provide a clearer understanding.

Relevance and perceived functions of social workers in Nigerian development programmes

All participants emphasised that the involvement of social workers is critical to attaining sustainability in Nigerian development programmes. In addition, the participants emphatically expressed some of the functions of social workers in Nigerian development programmes. The majority of participants indicated that social workers enhance the formulation of transformative social policies through advocacy, community education programmes, and competent practice, thereby enabling the active participation of the target population in development processes. These, according to the participants, ensure sustainable development, accessibility to programme outcomes, and social justice in society. Most participants indicated that social workers promote people's well-being and capabilities to attain their life aspirations. Other functions of social workers in development programmes identified by the participants include the competent use of skills, values, principles, theories, and models; techniques; culture; evidence-based practice; and adherence to the profession's code of ethics to protect human dignity and human rights. Some of the participants supported the relevance of social work, referring to the passing of the Social Work Bill in Nigeria: 'It is clear to everyone; the relevance of social work led to the enactment of the Nigerian Council of Social Work (Establishment) Bill 2017 in the year 2023' (SSWO4, Female, Asaba, 10/9/2025). 'Social workers are change agents and advocates for vulnerable groups to whom development programmes are directed. So, they are very relevant to development programme initiatives, administration, and implementation for sustainability' (SCDO1, Female, Asaba, 10/9/2025).

Development programmes and policies are about human capacity building and empowering people for effective social functioning. Social workers are professionally trained for all of these. The social work profession is highly relevant to development programmes in addressing social development problems, not only in Nigeria but globally. Social

workers apply skills, values, principles, theories, and models, and techniques, reflecting all socio-economic, cultural, political, and environmental factors for sustainable development (SWE1, Male, Ilorin, 9/7/2025).

Social work is critical to development programmes. Social workers advocate for and influence the formulation, administration, and implementation of adequate social policies that drive development programmes, ensure people's holistic well-being, and ensure active participation of target beneficiaries in development programmes, and equal accessibility, particularly for the marginalised, to development outcomes in societies, including Nigeria (SWE4, Male, Ilorin, 9/7/2025).

This study revealed that adequate involvement of social workers is relevant for achieving sustainable development in Nigeria. The participants argued that the relevance of social work led to the passage of the Nigerian Council of Social Work (Establishment) Bill 2017 in 2023. In addition, most participants indicated that social workers enable transformative social policies, active participation of the target population in development processes, sustainable development, accessibility to programme outcomes, and people's well-being and capabilities to attain their life aspirations. Similarly, previous studies have shown that social workers actively and creatively participated directly in policy formulation and in advocacy practices that promote social justice, the protection of human dignity, and human rights for the social functioning of the marginalised in Tanzania and Zimbabwe (Edmos & Munyaradzi, 2013; Manyama, 2018).

Many participants identified other functions of social workers in development programmes, including the competent use of skills, values, principles, theories and models, techniques, culture, evidence-based practice, and adherence to the profession's code of ethics to protect human dignity, human rights, and social justice. Similarly, previous studies found that social workers contributed significantly to care and support systems, the promotion of human rights, and the empowerment of vulnerable populations in Ethiopia (Abashula et al., 2014).

Scholars in South Africa reported that social workers made proficient use of values, principles, skills, techniques, and theoretical knowledge to meet basic human needs and enhance human well-being (Bila, 2019; Nozipho & Mpumelelo, 2026). Furthermore, scholars have shown that the social work profession has the potential to address social development problems not only in Nigeria but across the African continent (Amadasun, 2020; Ofem et al., 2021). Also, in Nigeria, social work has the competence to build the capacity of individuals, groups, or communities for social

functioning and improve the quality of life by creating an enabling environment (Ofem et al., 2021).

Perceived level of involvement and challenges facing social workers in Nigeria

Many participants indicated that social workers are under-involved in Nigerian development programmes due to various challenges that have maintained the status quo. The critical difficulties, according to the participants, include the unspecified role of social workers in Nigerian development programmes and agencies, inadequate funding, a lack of an autonomous social work regulatory body, and poor remuneration. Some participants indicated unfamiliarity with the role of social workers and the low presence of social workers at the macro level of practice as significant challenges to adequate social workers' involvement in Nigeria. 'We have always found it difficult to secure jobs in the government sector because it is assumed that any graduate can play the role of a social worker. It is quite unfortunate (UESG3, Female, Ilorin, 21/8/2025).

Furthering the low involvement of social workers in Nigerian development programmes, some participants indicated that this is mainly due to a lack of political will to formulate and implement effective social policies to eradicate poverty among citizens.

There is low involvement of social workers in Nigerian development programmes. The low level of involvement is critically due to the unspecified role of social workers in Nigerian development programmes and agencies, inadequate funding due to a lack of political will to create an enabling environment to eradicate poverty, and the engagement of non-social work graduates to handle social work roles as a result of unfamiliarity with the roles of social workers. Poor remuneration of social workers, leading to high rates of their migration to the Global North, where their roles are recognised and adequately remunerated (SWE2, Female, Ilorin, 12/8/2025).

Social workers' involvement is very low. For instance, most staff in Nigerian development ministries/agencies are sociologists, psychologists, economists, and educationists. We (social work graduates) are few in number, and we find it challenging to maintain our roles. We are not finding it easy because these roles are not well-defined. So, everyone (staff) assumes the responsibilities/roles of a social worker (SSWO3, Male, Asaba, 10/9/2025).

On the other hand, some participants blamed the low involvement of social workers in Nigerian development programmes on the inability of qualified social workers to form a professional regulatory body that excludes non-social work graduates from controlling the practice and creating adequate awareness about the role of social work in Nigeria.

The low involvement of social workers in Nigerian development programmes is primarily due to their limited presence at the macro level of practice, where they can influence/advocate for social development policies and adequate recognition. There is a need for an autonomous social work regulatory body composed solely of professionally qualified social workers (SCDO1, Female, Asaba, 10/9/2025).

However, a few participants ascribed the low involvement of social workers in Nigerian development programmes to the activities of non-social work graduates who are state actors, engaged as social workers, and deliberately undermining the role of social workers in Nigeria, 'there are more non-social work graduates engaged across the practice levels, micro, mezzo, and macro/policy practice. 'The low presence of social workers in policy practice is a significant setback to the profession's visibility, for adequate involvement in Nigeria' (UESG1, Male, Ilorin, 16/9/2025).

Emphatically, the low involvement of social workers in Nigerian development programmes is critically due to the influence of non-social work graduates and state actors, who, in most cases, supervise social work affairs, creating disunity among qualified social workers and hindering effective social work awareness creation. The acts of these non-social work graduates have negatively affected social workers' contributions to the formulation of adequate social policies and effective practice for sustainable development outcomes in Nigeria (SWE4, Male, Ilorin, 9/7/2025).

Despite the identified relevance of social work to Nigerian development programmes, this study revealed a low level of involvement of social workers in Nigeria due to some critical challenges, including an unspecified role of social workers resulting in the engagement of non-social work graduates to play the role of social workers, inadequate funding, and a low presence of social workers across all levels of practice. Similarly, previous studies shown that limited resources, ineffective policies, insufficient institutional support, and the setting of social work agenda by non-social work graduates, primarily in governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), are significant barriers to effective social work interventions for sustainable service delivery in Africa (Reese, 2011; Schmid et al., 2021). Scholars showed that social workers' roles were clearly left to other professionals, such as medical doctors, lawyers, journalists, religious associations, and teachers, in Zimbabwe (Edmos & Munyaradzi, 2013). Manyama (2018) and Poopedi and Bila (2023) found that social workers are confronted with challenges of highly contested workplaces, inadequate facilities, low engagement in policy practice due to institutional influence, which have contributed to a low visibility,

recognition, ineffective practice, and provision of sustainable services to users in South Africa and Tanzania.

In addition, this study identified a lack of an autonomous regulatory body and inadequate political will to eradicate poverty among the citizens as significant challenges to adequate involvement of social workers in Nigeria. Similarly, previous studies identified poor awareness creation about the profession, infiltration by untrained practitioners, lack of harmonisation amongst qualified social workers, inadequate social welfare/development services, lack of efficient social work regulatory body, poor design and implementation of social policies and programmes, coupled with poor indices of human capital development and insufficient funding as significant challenges to social workers in Nigeria (Amadasun, 2019; Lamidi & Igbokwe, 2021; Obeten et al., 2020).

Strategies for promoting effective involvement of social workers in Nigeria

The majority of participants indicated that social workers must develop and apply strategies to enhance the profession's visibility and ensure adequate involvement in Nigeria; otherwise, sustainability in Nigerian development programmes will remain a mirage. The participants argued that there is an urgent need for an organised and restricted Nigerian social work regulatory body for effective practice, awareness creation among the public, and advocacy for their adequate involvement in Nigeria for sustainable development, 'just like other professional bodies in Nigeria, e.g. the Nigerian Medical Association and Nigerian Bar Association, 'we need an unadulterated regulatory Nigerian professional association of social workers for adequate control, and effective practice for sustainable development' (SWE4, Male, Ilorin, 9/7/2025).

Social work practitioners must synergize with educators to research Nigerian policy practice, and the outcomes must be adequately disseminated and incorporated into the social work curriculum to further develop Nigerian social workers for active participation in policy practice. There is a need for the Nigerian government to create an enabling environment for stronger collaboration between social workers and policymakers to formulate adequate social policies that prioritise the involvement of social workers, poverty eradication, and sustainability in Nigerian development programmes (UESG1, Male, Ilorin, 16/9/2025).

Buttressing the strategies for more effective involvement of social workers in Nigerian development programmes, most participants suggested the need for adequate sensitisation of the general public, particularly Nigerian government functionaries, on the roles of social work in development programmes. The sensitisation, according to the participants, would

enable adequate visibility and involvement of social workers, with their roles specified in Nigerian development programmes.

To achieve a high level of involvement in Nigerian development programmes, social workers must sensitise the general public, including government functionaries, on the role of social work in development-related matters. We said earlier that most staff in the Nigerian development ministries/agencies are non-social work graduates. They (non-social workers) may have their roles to play, but these roles need to be clearly defined, particularly those of social workers, for adequate recognition and effective practice outcomes (SSWO3, Male, Asaba, 10/9/2025).

The findings from this study suggest that adequate involvement of social workers in development programmes could lead to sustainable development in Nigeria. In response, the participants identified many strategies to enhance the profession's visibility and achieve a high level of social workers' involvement in Nigerian development programmes. The approach suggested by the participants, include establishing a Nigerian social work autonomous regulatory body to supervise social work practice for effective outcomes, creating awareness about social work roles, advocating for adequate involvement of social workers in Nigerian development programmes, and commensurate remuneration, establishing a stronger collaboration among social work practitioners, educators and policymakers, incorporating policy practice into social work education curriculum, advocating for a stronger political will to eradicate poverty, and identifying and spelling out social workers' roles in Nigerian development programmes.

The findings of this study have some profound implications for social work education and practice. There is an urgent need for social work practitioners to establish an autonomous regulatory body to supervise social work administration and practice, raise awareness of social work roles, advocate for adequate social workers' involvement in development programmes, and ensure commensurate remuneration to achieve effective development outcomes in Nigeria. Social work practitioners must facilitate stronger collaboration with social work educators, service users, development agencies, and policymakers to formulate adequate development policies that prioritise poverty eradication programmes and the proper involvement of social workers in Nigerian development programmes. The participants believed that this collaboration would ensure active participation, particularly by the marginalised, in development processes, easier access to services, and sustainability in development programmes. In addition, the collaboration would enable social work educators to conduct research on development programmes

and to appropriately disseminate the outcomes to stakeholders for effective evidence-based practice. Social work educators, in collaboration with social work practitioners, policymakers, development agencies, student social workers (SSWs), and service users, aim to incorporate policy-practice into the Nigerian social work education curriculum to develop SSWs who would be actively engaged in policy-practice. The participants felt that this would enhance the profession's visibility, ensure adequate involvement of social workers, strengthen political will to eradicate poverty, and ensure the proper recognition of social work roles in Nigerian development programmes for sustainable development.

This study explored the lived experiences of SWEs, SSWOs, and SCDOs in Ilorin and Asaba Metropolises of Nigeria. To further enable the generalisability of the findings, scholars should conduct more comprehensive research that covers wider areas with a larger target population/participant, including SWEs, SWOs, SCDOs, NGOs, and other development partners. However, this study resonated with other studies conducted in Nigeria and Africa. It recommends the urgent establishment of an autonomous regulatory body by Nigerian social workers, the formulation of adequate development policies that prioritise poverty eradication programmes, and the involvement of social workers in Nigeria for effective practice and sustainable outcomes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, globally, the involvement of professionally qualified social workers in social development programmes is significant to achieving sustainable development. Since independence in 1960, successive Nigerian governments have established various development programmes to eradicate poverty among their citizens. However, sustainable development has yet to be achieved due to a low level of qualified social workers' involvement in these programmes. This study used a qualitative research design. The study utilised purposive and snowball sampling techniques to include 19 participants from Ilorin and Asaba Metropolises of Nigeria. The study employed an unstructured in-depth interview (IDI) guide for data collection, which the researcher thematically analysed. The findings revealed that the involvement of social workers is critical to attaining sustainability in Nigerian development programmes. Despite their relevance, the participants indicated a low participation of social workers in Nigerian development programmes due to many critical challenges, including unspecified role of social workers resulting in the engagement of non-social work graduates playing the role of social workers, inadequate funding, a low presence of social workers across all levels of social work practice, a lack of

autonomous regulatory body, and insufficient political will to eradicate poverty.

In response to the identified challenges, this study suggests raising awareness of social work roles and advocating for adequate social workers' involvement in Nigeria. Most importantly, this study recommends the urgent establishment of an autonomous regulatory body by social workers, the formulation of appropriate development policies that prioritise poverty eradication programmes, and the adequate involvement of social workers to ensure effective practice and sustainability in Nigerian development programmes.

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