Rural Aging, Social Isolation and the Ethics of Social Services Provision in Kenya

In Kenya, the number of old person (age 60 and above) has risen from a modest 270,000 in 1949 when the first National Census survey was carried out to 1,400,000 in 1999 during last National Census survey. It is projected that the number of old persons will be over 2 million by the year 2020. At present, this category of the Kenyan population is faced with various challenges which include poor health, food security and nutrition, lack of adequate physical amenities especially proper housing, low education levels, low or no income, and lack of participation in social order (G.O.K 2006). This paper critically analyses the situation older Kenyans in rural areas are faced with. What we have is a situation where the aged Kenyans are steadily being socially isolated thus polarizing the country into the urban and pre-urban young and the rural and slum old. In this background therefore, providing services to the older people and other special groups such as the physically and mentally challenged, the child and the homeless citizen should be seen as a profession with a set standards or guidelines of conduct.

The study has revealed that the highest level of formal education attained by the rural old is that of primary; that 60 percent of the rural old have a weekly income of less than Ksh. 500 (estimated at 0.98 U.S. Dollars per day) and that Physical Isolation is a big contributing factor to the breaking down of the traditional structures where the old lived together with the rest of the members In a socially, politically, economically and psychologically rewarding physical space. For the Gusii people in Kenya, they are currently faced with three major social problems which have been manifesting themselves in a spiral progression: First, is the disappearance of the extended family and as a result, family care for the aged is significantly absent. Secondly, community cohesion is fast being eroded in a change where the traditional structures and organization are being replaced by the modern ones, which do not provide for the kind of communalism that was experienced in the traditional society. Third, and which seems to be the ending note to the community and other rural communities in Kenya undergoing similar changes is the glaring absence of a welfare commitment by the state. This therefore means that the rural aged is not part of the current social systems; that the rural old have been reduced to mere recipients of “charity”. What we see today is a rural community in which Africa’s four great values of Kinship, Sharing, Solidarity and Common good are fast fading away and the contemporary systems are not substituting the traditional ones in a meaningful way to be able to restore the lost equilibrium.