MICHIGAN STATE
U N I V E R S I T Y

Social Work and Social Development: A Partnership in Social Change +

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ABSTRACT

Poverty, both relative and absolute is increasing worldwide. War, natural disasters and environmental degradation have exacerbated economic deprivation, social exclusion and political marginalisation for many of the earth's people. Into this bleak picture comes social development to offer a beacon of hope. What role can social work educators and practitioners play in social development to reverse the pessimism portrayed by this view of reality? This article examines this question by looking at the processes and policies that social workers must bring to the attention of governments – in order to convince them to follow these in the interests of enabling people, whether as individuals, groups or communities to develop to their full potential. The situation in Britain is used as a case example, but the author points out that the changes brought about there through structural adjustment provide lessons to be learnt elsewhere in the world.

Social Development

The meaning of the term is diverse and varied. For some, social development is about modernisation. For others, it suggests an investment in people. But as social workers are like magpies who pick the best of what they see, I shall define it as a dynamic way of organising resources and human interactions to create opportunities through which the potential of all peoples – individually and collectively – can be developed to the full. In other words, social development is about putting people first on a worldwide scale. This view of social development suggests that we must beware of the wolf that comes in sheep's clothing. And, at the same time, it offers a way of differentiating between the two: if people and their needs come second or don't feature at all, it is the wolf. Don't let it in. For the opposite of social development is social underdevelopment. And whilst the former can liberate people from want, the latter destroys us.

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A look at the global scene tells us that today despite our ability to travel in cyberspace or tangle with virtual reality, the actual situation in which the majority of the world's people live is grim. Underdevelopment features more commonly on the planet's landscape than development. Poverty, hunger, unemployment, colonising wars and environmental degradation are symptomatic of this fact. Whether in the affluent West or poor South, investment in people has lagged behind expectations. The streets of London, like those of Karachi, are paved with beggars, not gold. Meanwhile, multinational corporations are rolling in the cash. Coca-Cola, frequently sighted in both locations, has moved from number 14 to 6 in the top company rankings in 1995. With assets of $US 79 billion, it has more resources under its control than many national governments in the South. Yet, it wants more and is constantly seeking new markets.

Why is underdevelopment such a prominent feature of modern life and how can we get away from it? Again, there are a number of answers to this question, but I will focus on one aspect – the link between the global economy and the welfare state. The intensely competitive nature of a market-driven economy has had serious implications for the ability of nation states to sustain high levels of public expenditures devoted to welfare provisions. In most countries, the pressure has been to cutback on these drastically. The whittling away of the welfare state has been a central plank in the strategies of 'structural adjustment' advocated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. These have defined welfare state spending as parasitical and unproductive. But worse still, monetarist gurus have declared that providing people with welfare resources saps them of individual initiative and makes them dependent on the state. Under their invective, state benefits, whether paid for out of contributions made by a family provider or not, are made to sound like charitable handouts. This position, I hope to show, is misguided. I will do so by considering the case of Britain, a developed country which has undergone 'structural adjustment' – with devastating results for ordinary people. In sharing with you this experience which also forms part of my personal biography, I hope you will be able to learn from our mistakes and avoid them here in Zimbabwe and other countries in Southern Africa.

'Structural Adjustment' and the Crisis of the Welfare State in Britain

In one sense 'structural adjustment' has lain at the heart of the British welfare state since its inception. It wasn't called that then – 'Treasury control' was a clearer term. But the effect was the same: social policies and welfare provisions were subordinated to economic exigencies. The question to be answered was not, "*What system*

should we develop to meet the needs of our people?," but *"what kind of welfare state can we get with the limited sums of money the Treasury makes available?"* Its priority has been money, not people.

The situation is more cynical than this, however. The Treasury has routinely set aside only enough money to fund 60% of potential demand of those welfare benefits that are allowed.

Thus, the usual practice has been to budget for under-demand, not entitlements. Moreover, the majority of the population do not require the intervention of the welfare state for the greater part of their lives. Even in the case of statecare in old age (currently depicted as a voracious consumer of public resources), all except five per cent of older people are cared for by their families, at home, not the government-funded facilities. Nonetheless, the unravelling of the British welfare state, limited though it was, began in earnest in the mid-1970s when Britain needed to go to the IMF, cap in hand to beg for money. A major condition of the loan was the removal of welfare subsidies to cut back on public sector borrowing. This led the then Labour government which had been recently elected on a radical welfare programme to reduce subsidies on food, eg, bread, milk, and introduce user charges for previously free goods and services, eg, medicine, and raise user fees where these existed previously. Does this course of action sound familiar to you? In short, the costs of public provisions became shunted back onto the consumer.

This account makes it clear that monetarism as public policy in Britain preceded Margaret Thatcher, but it was carried out in a less overtly ideological way. Once Maggie became our ruler, matters became more explicit. She was not merely responding to economic forces; she firmly believed this was the way to go. She believed the state should get out of people's lives. And this notion, the *"withering away of the state,"* became a central plank in New Right ideology. But ironically, her government became increasingly centralised. Under her leadership local democracy became subject to central government fiscal control. Her government was the one that also abolished recalcitrant local authorities for pursuing emancipatory agendas, undermined civil liberties through legislative fiat, curtailed the right to organise and protest and proscribed secondary picketing and sympathy strikes. Tougher penalties were imposed on protesters caught trespassing as a legislative revolution took place alongside Thatcher's fiscal one. Social Security benefits were cut back and some groups, eg, 16-18 year olds were excluded completely from claiming benefits on the grounds that their families would provide for them regardless of their ability to meet this expectation.

As a result, the central government played a key role in facilitating 'structural adjustments' which exacted a terrible toll from the populace: high unemployment; rising crime; and increased poverty. However, reducing welfare expenditures allowed the state to release the resources previously tied up in welfare provisions

for private capital. It also contributed to lowering expectations about the state's responsibility to provide for society's weakest members. This trend was to engulf the personal social services in the 1990s when the government compelled local authorities to sell off their excess facilities and become purchasers of welfare services made available by providers in the voluntary and commercial sectors. Here too, these changes have excluded the poorest people from accessing the services they need and to which they are legally entitled. As we have recently discovered, in the administration of community care budgets in social services departments, a lack of resources may mean entitlements cannot be realised. For example, an older person needing domiciliary care may be turned down because the domiciliary budget has been spent before they made their claim.

These changes have meant that social workers no longer engage in therapeutic relationships with clients; they have become accountants instead. In the meantime, state services have become residualised and the arguments are being made that they should be targeted more selectively to those most in need. This targeting becomes a form of rationing which carries a lot of stigma. The subsequent demonising of the poor and the 'moral panics' being created by government and orchestrated through the media facilitate a strategy of 'blaming the victims' of structural change for their plight. Moreover, the restructuring of service delivery has had an impact on how social workers' jobs are secured. Privatisation and the demand that social services, like other government spending be cut, has compelled managers to reorganise their labour force in order to cope. In the process social workers have been made to apply for their own jobs. Domiciliary staff have been re-employed by private commercial companies contracted to do work previously done in-house at lower rates of pay and with fewer fringe benefits. These changes have led to a deprofessionalising of social work, as tasks once undertaken by qualified social workers are now the remit of lower paid unqualified ones. Adding to the lowering of the status of the profession is the government's threatened withdrawal of social work training from universities. The changes initiated through 'structural adjustment' not only increase poverty, they augment insecurity amongst both the middle and working classes. Even those who are employed fear the loss of their jobs and further decreases in wages.

Globalisation and the Welfare State

Globalisation of the economy has been a major driving force behind this shift in social relations and has resulted in the creation of new relationships between labour, capital, the individual and the state. Intense competition between countries seeking new sources of capital has drawn the welfare state into the global economic

orbit. In Britain, the central state controls 40% of gross national product (GNP) through the welfare state and public utilities. Freeing up the resources locked up in state ownership requires the privatisation of welfare services. Privatisation also means that market differentiated capital will only invest in those services which are profitable.

Services for people with chronic problems are in a market driven agenda: unprofitable items of no interest to entrepreneurs seeking to make money. The most vulnerable people will, therefore, have to resort to residualised state services and all the stigma doing so entails. However, such provisions are now dressed up by a pro-market government as *"targeting the most needy groups."* To counter the alienation and unresponsiveness which such forms of service delivery engender, it is important that social workers treat people with respect and acknowledge their capacity to act as agents. No one is merely a 'victim.' People resist disempowerment and seek to maximise the opportunities they have to shape events.

Social workers need to be sensitive enough to pick up the cues people give out and find ways of fostering their ability to control their own lives. Moreover, social workers have an important role to play in highlighting the appalling conditions many individuals live in and use the information they collect to argue for universal provisions accessible to all – as of a right. Indeed, I would go further and say that the most important welfare principle for us to validate is the *"I exist therefore I have rights"* principle. The right of every individual to political enfranchisement, a decent quality of life – clean water, sanitation, an unpolluted environment, food, clothing, shelter, health care, education, and personal care – which, if incapacitated, ought to be encompassed by this proposal. These rights are things that every human being should have regardless of where they live or have come from. Moreover, social workers can demonstrate why this should be so. From their detailed work with clients, they can catalogue the price individuals and communities are paying for society's collective failure to provide these rights. Moreover, I would argue that in a global market and an increasingly internationalised world, welfare provisions and entitlement to them have transcended the boundaries of the nation state. We must increasingly think of how to internationalise these from the point of view of users and professionals.

Unemployment and Criminality

The welfare business is internationalising. For example, American companies are coming into Britain to buy old peoples' homes being sold off by the welfare state at bargain basement prices. In the process of these facilities being privatised, public sector social care workers are being made redundant and being asked to apply for these 'new' jobs. The rates of pay for these newly appointed front-line workers are

lower than was previously the case. Job security has been replaced by job insecurity. Low-paid casual jobs in the welfare sector have become the norm. Most of these jobs are unattractive to men and are taken up primarily by women. Meanwhile, men have lost their traditional blue collar jobs in the public utilities and private manufacturing industries. With few other alternatives open to workers, unemployment has become once again a mass phenomenon. Only this time, the computer-led technological revolution will not be providing replacement jobs for those displaced from heavy industries.

The problem of male unemployment is becoming one of our most serious social problem, particularly for younger and older men. Their prospects for gainful employment are bleak. Men's role as provider is becoming impossible to fulfil. As traditional masculine roles are in a state of decline, men are seeking other possibilities. Unfortunately most of these are not located in the formal economy. Thus, in desperation, men, particularly younger men are turning to the informal economy where the lure of easy money through drugs, crime and prostitution is strong. Indeed, in Britain the position for young men is so dire that many of them will never hold waged work. Many have even stopped expecting to ever hold a waged job. As a result, of their individualised responses to structural change, one third of young men under the age of 30 has been convicted of an offence other than motoring. If motoring offences which are primarily a crime young men commit were to be included, the figures would be substantially higher. Can any society afford to criminalise a large section of its population for structural reasons? I think not. Responding to the problems this issue raises requires a multi-faceted approach involving the education system and a reconsideration of how we organise work. Education must become more than a field in which people are trained for non-existent jobs. Learning must cease to be a mind-numbing exercise which kills individual initiative and curiosity. In other words, our education systems must put people first by meeting their learning needs. Working careers must take on board peoples lives around a whole set of contingencies – family life, community involvement and work commitment. Dare we think of what kind of world we would need to create if the division of labour were to be internationalised to enable all the work which needs to be done to be equitably shared so that we didn't have people who were extremely overworked whilst the remainder suffered the consequences of being either underworked or without work?

The Role of Social Work in the Social Development Process

What can social workers do to intervene in the process of 'structural adjustment' and contribute to social development as I have defined it? Social work comes into

the equation as the profession charged with developing people's well-being on both personal and collective levels. Most social workers share a belief that their work should make life easier for people by integrating them into society's institutions and social structures. However, there is controversy about how this goal is to be achieved. Moreover, there are a number of ways of going about this task. The principal ones that are relevant to this discussion are the *'maintenance'* and the *'liberationist'* approaches to social work.

Those adopting a 'maintenance' orientation work to help people adjust better to the prevailing situation. Those who pursue a 'liberationist' perspective seek to challenge the status quo and develop progressive alternatives to existing provisions. Whilst both approaches can help in different ways, I feel the liberationist orientation is most relevant to social development because it seeks to enable people to redefine their position and change it for the better. This may mean challenging existing social relations and changing the existing distribution of power and resources. In this process of change, the social worker is an enabler or a catalyst involved in mobilising people and advocating with and for them.

Social workers involved in social development need the wisdom of Solomon, the knowledge of an encyclopaedia and the stamina of the long distance runner. Their task in the ever-unfolding drama is to facilitate the empowerment of those they serve. This in turn requires the social workers to reinterpret their professionalism – away from the detached bureaucrat or technician into the well-informed activist who cares about and for others. Emancipatory politics become incorporated into social work practice via a practitioner involvement rooted in the ethos of 'serving the people.'

If social workers are to take a stand against underdevelopment, they can draw on the profession's long-standing commitment to developing people's well-being. Moreover, as mediators between the individual and society, social workers have a critical role in upholding the human and welfare rights of vulnerable people. Social workers, as workers who know in detail people's daily struggles to free themselves from being disempowered by systemic forces of exclusion can act as powerful advocates who:

a)   highlight their plight by naming and identifying the pain of disenfranchised people; and

b)   demand that their situation be substantially improved.

Social Work and Social Justice

Practising in ways which endorse participatory and liberationist approaches to social work firmly places social workers in the arena of those arguing for social justice. In short, they become agents of social change who do not endorse methods

which identify the personal pathology of clients as the cause of social ills. This perspective does not mean that people do not take responsibility for shaping their future. Indeed, making choices about what to do is part of the process of asserting control and taking action to eliminate human misery. A major part of that choice is to reject the privileging of the few over the many and seek to establish a more equitable distribution of power and resources worldwide.

Having choice in the abstract, or as a concrete option, is meaningless without the purchasing power to realise one's preference. Increasing the potential of the world's poor people to truly exercise choice sounds like a tall order. It both is and it isn't. The UN Social Summit estimates that the world needs to spend $US 30-40 billion per year to get rid of poverty. The top 10 companies in the world made more than this in profits last year. If the UN were to introduce an underdevelopment tax on the top 1000 companies in the world – located mainly in the US, Japan, Britain, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands, the problem could be solved easily and by the people who had made a substantial contribution to creating the problem of underdevelopment in the first place. Moreover, they could help others overcome economic disadvantage and still receive a fair return on their outlay.

Adopting an advocacy role places social workers firmly in the arena of those arguing for forms of social organisation which endorse social justice. In short, working on behalf of marginalised groups turns social workers into advocates of social change using emancipatory forms of intervention with clients. This liberationist tendency in social work contrasts sharply with its more conservative counterpart which focuses on *"maintenance"* (Davies, 1994:45), or assisting individuals to cope more adequately with their social environment. Without insisting that the situation the client is located within be changed, social workers as advocates cannot secure benefits for an individual's well-being in the longer term. Moreover, in arguing for a focus on structural matters and insisting that the problems of individuals be situated within their social milieu, I am not precluding people from taking responsibility for how they behave and the choices they make in any given situation. But I am saying that the choices they make are made within a social context in which their access to power and resources can be hindered or not, depending on their position within it and the actions of others. Thus, a social work concerned with social development has an interest in addressing the structural causes of human misery as well as individual failings. And, in doing so, the practitioner seeks to understand the connections between the two. In other words, the person, whether social worker or 'client,' as agent acts as both object and subject of their material circumstances. People act as well as get acted upon and they interact with others in a constant dynamic of action, inaction and interaction.

Social development has traditionally been taken to mean working in communities to develop local potential, largely in the Third World, to draw them more

effectively into a capitalist nexus which accorded primacy to industrialisation strategies. I am going to argue that social development in the 1990s is about meeting human needs in both industrialised and industrialising countries; in urban areas as well as rural areas; in majority communities and in minority communities; in the social sphere and the ecological sphere. In short, the social development process needs to be a holistic one which recognises the interdependence of people and their relationships to our planet.

From this perspective, I would also want to challenge the 'structural adjustment' strategies favoured by the World Bank and the IMF because these emphasise the privileging of the few over the many with deleterious consequences for human welfare, particularly in the short-term. In the long-term, as Keynes pointed out, "we are all dead." But the IMF and World Bank approaches prioritise economic needs at the expense of social needs and break the reciprocity which is essential in safeguarding a humanist vision of social development.

The Vision of Social Development

A new vision of social development, therefore, has to be rooted in making certain rights accessible to every individual on this planet regardless or who they are or where they are. Governments at the international, national and local levels need to embark on a process of making these rights available to everyone and guaranteeing their observance. They also have a coordinating role in ensuring every one participates in the realisation of these rights for both themselves and others. This commitment could provide a new social contract between the individual and the state. In it, both would have to give as well as take. The rights I am referring to are more than political and economic. Some are environmental rights aimed at facilitating an appreciation of natural resources as well as a willingness to use them. I identify these rights as the following:

- basic necessities of life
    - food, clothing, shelter
- infrastructure of public hygiene
    - clean water
    - sewage disposal
    - unpolluted environment
- education
- health-sustaining environment
- health care
- personal social services (to vary across life cycle in response to need)
- new patterns of employment which encompass the whole population
- leisure.

This new contract between individuals and society would become the basis of what I call a *life-sustaining social development* and could be encapsulated in a charter which the international community through a network of national states would become responsible for upholding, in partnership with a diverse network of national governmental and non-governmental organisations capable of working within a nation state and across its frontiers in others.

In this internationalising drama, I would argue that there is a specific place for social work. Acting in the role of facilitators, social workers can engage in translating abstract notions of social development to concrete action which brings about their realisation on the ground. Social workers, therefore, play the key role of partner in the process of bringing about social change at the local level. Their tasks would then become those of:

- seeking resources for local communities;
- developing ways of extending limited resources through their judicious but equitable use;
- assisting in the design and delivery of services that respond to an agenda that is set locally;
- responding to individual needs;
- internationalising the social work agenda whilst retaining the capacity to respond to local needs; and
- working for the portability of an individual's social rights across national boundaries.

By acting as midwives in the social development process, social workers can redefine the social work task to be more in keeping with the imperatives of ensuring social justice – one of social work's traditional ethical concerns. They also facilitate in the forging of links between individuals and local communities, and between their communities and the broader world. By bridging different layers of community in this way, social workers participate in the creation of a more humane world. I conclude with a South African saying which states that *"People become people through other people."* In other words we (re)claim our humanity by respecting and reinforcing the humanity of others. Let us as social workers use social development as one way of realising ourselves and our professional aspirations.

Reference

Davies, Martin (1994) **The Essential Social Worker: An introduction to professional practice in the 1990s**, 3rd edition, Ashgate Publishing Company, Aldershot, UK.