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Effective Intervention Roles of South African Social Workers in an Appropriate, Relevant and Progressive Social Welfare Model

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the social welfare policy under apartheid in South Africa where differential access to social welfare services was enshrined as part of the racially segregated society. It explores proposals for a social welfare model that will be appropriate to the South African social welfare setting. The author suggests that social welfare is now in a process of transition and as evidence summarises conclusions and proposals of the "progressive social work fraternity". These not only criticise the status quo, but seek positive and affirmative action in the direction of citizen participation and social development. The author concludes by suggesting an alternative radical paradigm which questions the traditional residual modes of intervention, and instead suggests a committed advocative position for social workers in the new South Africa, which encourages empowerment and self-help initiatives.

Introduction

There is an urgent need to develop a relevant and acceptable social welfare model in South Africa, which would allow social workers to engage in effective and appropriate professional intervention. In this context the present roles of social workers are scrutinised, with the express purpose of evolving and presenting more effective roles that would help to meet the challenges facing the South African social work fraternity.

The article should not be seen in isolation to the discussions that have taken place in various social work conferences in South Africa and elsewhere since 1987. Progressive social workers of various persuasions have begun to question their own roles in human service delivery. The conferences at the University of the Western Cape "Social Welfare at the Watershed", 1987 (1); University of the Witwatersrand "Towards a Democratic Welfare System - Options and Strategies", 1989 (2); Maputo "Health and Welfare in Transition", 1990 (3); and the University

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of the Western Cape "Peoples' Health and Social Services", 1991 (4) along with numerous other seminars, workshops, discussions, protest pickets, etc, have clearly indicated that social workers, especially those within the progressive fraternity, are in search of a unitary, non-racist, democratic welfare system.

With the unbanning of political organisations in February 1990 by President de Klerk, and a Transitional Executive Council in place in preparation for the real transfer of power, especially after the 27th April 1994 elections, progressive organisations in South Africa are faced with the urgent need now to give substance to the many demands and aspirations that have been expressed through the years of *apartheid* domination.

Social Welfare Models: South African Proposals

The Reality

Social workers are constantly aware of the limited resources with which they have to service a society affected by mass poverty, low economic growth and rising employment. Limited personnel is one big concern. By 1st September 1992, according to the South African Council for Social Work (1992) there were 7,769 registered social workers servicing a population of 37,532,000 (Race Relations 1989/90). With an annual increase in population of 800,000, social workers are outweighed by the hundreds of thousands of individuals and families in needy and deprived communities (Schrire, 1990).

The goals set by the social welfare fraternity are hardly achievable unless the ruling structures of the country develop the political will to uproot poverty and promote healthy living and working conditions for all its citizens. It is true that the economic policy makers in South Africa often view social welfare with scepticism as it is regarded as a factor of the economy which uses funds but does not generate funds through productive activities. This is in line with the views of the statement of former State President, President Botha, in 1988 at a Nationalist Party Congress, when he warned that the state was more likely to reduce social investment expenditure in the future than increase it (Wilson and Ramphela, 1989).

Apartheid Social Welfare Policy

When the Nationalist Party came into power in 1948, the apartheid policy was enforced through a wide range of legislation, the Population Registration Act of 1950 being one of its cornerstones. This Act classified the population into four racial categories which paved the way for racial differential access to social welfare services and social benefits. Different state departments became responsible for

social welfare provision to the different population groups. These departments are controlled by the tri-cameral government which is racially divided, eg House of Representatives of the coloured population, House of Delegates for the Indian population, House of Assembly for the White population; and for the Black population, Regional Services Councils, local community councils and the provincial administrations. Welfare resources are unequally allocated to the different racial groups, with Whites benefiting disproportionately (Vogelman, 1988; Patel, 1992).

Since 1990 the State has been trying to implement parity in the social pensions to the elderly, but presently there still remains a large disparity in the amounts paid. Black pensioners since 1989 receive their pension on a monthly basis whereas previously it was paid bimonthly.

To indicate the seriousness of the situation of no parity, the Chief Director of Welfare Services, Dr Wallace Stevens, in May 1989 stated that parity in pension payments would cost the government an additional R5 billion (ed note: R3,4 = US\$1 (1994 rates)) and was hardly likely under the present circumstances (Race Relations, 1989/1990:1xiv).

Some progress was forthcoming in the 1992/1993 Budget. The then Minister of Finance, Mr Barend du Plessis, announced an increase and closing of the gap between pensions for different racial groups, but the disparity was not eliminated. The evidence (of this gap) is indicated by the following:

Africans	receive	R253 per month
Asians and Coloureds	receive	R318 per month
Whites	receive	R345 per month

(People's Express, 1992: 3).

The author agrees with Jinabhai (1986:3) that the South African social welfare policy rests on the residual welfare model which emphasises individualism and individual pathology, the principle elements being:

"... that every citizen is responsible for his own welfare and social adjustment, that of his family and of the community. Only where the citizen fails to sustain his independence in these regards, does the state come to his assistance in co-operation with private effort".

The principle of privatisation in social welfare is also central in this statement, which implies limited state responsibility for social services and expecting the business sector to play a major role in the provision of finance for welfare.

***Apartheid* Social Welfare in Transition: Alternate Models**

Dismantling the institutions of *apartheid* and dealing with their consequences cannot be achieved in a short period. We have experienced in our country a surge of protests of all sorts against the bastions of oppression. The social welfare fraternity has also positioned itself amongst the Mass Democratic forces in the struggle against *apartheid* welfare.

Evidence of this is that in October 1989 the Social Workers' Forum staged a protest picket in Cape Town calling for a single welfare department, and a memorandum was handed to the office of the Minister of National Health and Population Development, Dr Rina Venter. This was not an isolated event, but was reinforced by the protest action of the Co-ordinating Committee against Welfare Policy, Johannesburg, and the Welfare Policy Committee in Durban (Social Workers Forum, 1989).

It is interesting that in October 1992 social workers of the Cape Mental Health Society, along with the Organisation for the Physically Disabled of South Africa had also held a protest picket and march to the offices of the Cape Provincial Administration for racial parity, efficient welfare administration of grants for parents of disabled children and, amongst others, adequate devices for the disabled (Argus, 1992).

The aforementioned are just some of the actions that the social welfare fraternity have involved themselves in. If social workers are to be seen as relevant and supportive, then these are some of the activities that consumers of welfare would want to see them involved in.

At this point the proposals of certain South African social workers who to a great extent represent the views of the progressive social welfare fraternity are presented.

Louw (1990) in his proposition for a social welfare model in a non-racial, democratic, unitary South Africa, sums up the proposals of Patel (1989) and Letsebe and Loffel (1990). He notes that pertinent issues and principles would be concerned with the following:

1. Social welfare services must be organised on a non-racial basis.
2. A single state department of social welfare services serving all South African citizens should be created.
3. The partnership of welfare service responsibilities by the State and the private, voluntary welfare sector needs to be clarified, services improved and de-racialised, and community participation encouraged.

4. The dominant rehabilitative, psycho-social, pathological approach in theory and in practice should be re-considered. A variety of approaches, including the development approach, need to be strongly considered.
5. Length of social work training and professional expertise need to be reviewed in the context of the demands of the majority, and their unsatisfied needs require attention.
6. Social welfare needs to be interpreted broadly – not just serving the casualties of society. Welfare should be interpreted as embracing human need in the form of food, shelter, employment, health, education and social security.

A very important point that Patel (1989) highlights and which was proposed at the May 1989 Johannesburg Conference (5) is the need for *"...conscious efforts to begin the process of dismantling the old welfare order and laying the building blocks for the new"*. This point is again highlighted, but as a matter of progress, at the June 1991 Consultative Conference in Johannesburg (6). It was reported by some of the voluntary welfare organisations that the issue of racism in their organisations was now being addressed by staff members; efforts are being made to desegregate management structures which have been dominated by White, middle-class do-gooders; agencies traditionally serving Black clients are now reaching out to White communities, and racial inequalities in service delivery are being addressed in some agencies through strategic planning of future services (Patel, 1992).

At the April 1990 Maputo Conference, Patel and De Beer (1990) clearly emphasised the principles of equity, appropriateness and participation needed in a new social welfare dispensation. At the same Conference Letsebe and Loffel (1990:17) supported the former and added the following very important principles:

"... the family is a natural and fundamental unit of society, and government will ensure circumstances in which secure and fulfilling family life will be protected, and the needs of those who are disabled or in any way disadvantaged will be specifically addressed through affirmative action".

It is clear that the social welfare fraternity is not only criticising the system but is prepared to seek and work at constructive alternatives. In this respect the author supports Moosa (1989:5) in reinforcing the aforementioned statement by noting that two distinct processes are inseparable: *"... in the process of dismantling the evil system of apartheid and that of building the new democratic system"*.

An Alternative Proposal

The author wishes to endorse and support the proposals made by the above-mentioned writers, as they are social welfare professionals with first-hand experience of the South African reality and who have consulted broadly.

It is important, further, to note that the social welfare policy of a nation is not operative in isolation from the its dominant philosophy. Dixon (1981) makes an appropriate observation that the social objectives are influenced by the prevailing philosophy in a given society, which, in turn, are crucial determinants of the society's welfare policies and related administrative procedures.

Thus, knowing the South African dominant philosophy of *apartheid*, which is within a broadly free market system, and the de-humanising consequences it has had on the majority of the population, the author strongly wishes to propose and advocate a radical paradigm or approach for an alternate social welfare policy and social work theory and practice. If the progressive social welfare fraternity is serious about contributing to radical social transformation in South Africa, rather than modifying the social system, then the radical approach would be the most effective strategy to engage. The challenge then to the social welfare fraternity is to radically transform the residual, fragmented, discriminatory, expensive and personal-oriented welfare policy, to one that is unitary, non-racial, democratic and humane.

This radical approach needs to permeate the intervention roles of social workers consistently in order to be effective. It is imperative that social workers critically analyse the sphere they work in. This point is supported by Galper (1980: 8) who notes that radical social work is "... essentially understanding the position of the oppressed in the context of the social economic structures they live in". Freire (1985:113) also emphasises this statement in his humanistic approach to human interaction which he calls "*critical consciousness of the social reality*".

This approach poses questions to the traditional set mode of intervention styles. As a continuance of the aforementioned points, social workers then cannot be neutral or ethically indifferent to the social reality if it is the source of people's problems. By way of reinforcing the point, Naidoo (1988:11) notes that social workers must never cease to expose the ways in which "... *exploitation and oppression create victims*".

This awareness certainly has implications for social work intervention methods. One could ask whether the casework/intrapsychic method should be the dominant problem-solving one? Should collective solutions to the problems, in consultation with those directly affected, not be sought?

Jinabhai (1986), in reference to the training of social workers, notes that it is geared towards the treatment of symptoms, providing handouts which encourages the welfare-dependency syndrome. The author would further add that social work training is predominantly urban-biased. As a result the majority of newly-qualified social workers practice in urban areas to the neglect of rural areas where services and resources are extremely limited.

The radical and humanistic approach encourages social workers to be "change agents" and "agents of change" as proposed by Rothmund (1990) and Freire (1985). Thus they are called upon to play various roles in the humanising process. As educators we need to ensure critical discussion of information and the sharing of knowledge, eg research documents, articles, books, etc, in the search for new and appropriate ideas and models of intervention that would be applicable to the community or people served.

Social work as a helping profession, through the radical approach, can encourage the roles of enabler, facilitator and advocate, while simultaneously engaging the strategies of empowerment and self-help. Payne (1991) explains that through the strategy of empowerment, people are encouraged to take charge of issues that affect their social well-being. This statement links up with what Rothmund (1990) states, ie that social workers must not only make people aware of unsatisfactory social conditions that negatively affect them, but must strongly motivate them to take action in order to bring about positive change to their prevailing situation. It is important also that social workers put options in an honest way to the communities served, as it will help them to make appropriate decisions.

In essence, therefore, the radical social work paradigm:

1. Offers the ideals of a humanitarian and egalitarian society. This point is emphasised by Patel (1989) and Letsebe and Loffel (1990) in outlining the basic principles for a new social welfare system.
2. Locates the sources of problems in the socio-economic system. If breadwinners are unemployed because of widespread retrenchments, and as a result do not have money to adequately support the family (which could then give rise to many 'snowballing' problems for the families concerned), then the source of the problem is within the market mechanisms, rather than as a result of individual deviant behaviour.
3. There is an emphasis on change instead of adjustment and this demands an understanding of fundamental change processes which is not offered by traditional social work.
4. Encourages collective action and solutions in consultation with people. Collective activities could also inspire positive activities such as the development of co-operatives for the manufacturing and selling of goods that would benefit the collective.

5. Recognises the need for political action. As Freire (1985) points out, social work cannot be neutral. It otherwise would choose a reactionary option, which undermines the forces of transformation. Already progressive social workers in organisations like the Social Workers' Forum, the Concerned Social Workers, Southern African Black Social Workers, and others have chosen to be on the side of the democratic movement for social change.
6. Requires social workers to be consistent and persistent in their roles as enablers, facilitators and advocates in their struggle for a humane welfare system.

Conclusion

The radical paradigm does offer a constructive and viable alternative approach to the residual model of welfare in the South African context. However it can only become reality if all the key players are prepared to work at change consistently and relentlessly.

Much is expected of social workers who are significant change agents within the social welfare arena. But as the social transformation process affects the entire South African society, it implies that social workers, out of necessity, have to align themselves and join forces with other social worker organisations, other professionals and community social service groups whose common goal is social justice. Thus, social workers have to examine their own commitment to this change process. Remaining neutral would be a statement in itself.

It is clear that radical social work highlights many issues of concern in the southern African social welfare system, a pertinent one being the lack of unity amongst social worker bodies. This is obviously a reflection of life in the broader society. It is through time that social workers acknowledge their differences, and work at minimising these so that progress can be made towards the establishment of a National Forum or Association of Social Workers in South Africa. Many painful but hopeful days lay ahead in our move towards social justice, democracy and unity.

Footnotes

- (1) Organised by the Department of Social Work at the University of the Western Cape, on 16th and 17th October 1987, with the theme: "Social Welfare at the Watershed".
- (2) Hosted by the School of Social Work at the University of the Witwatersrand and an organising committee consisting of social worker representatives from progressive social worker bodies in Durban, Cape Town and on the Witwatersrand, on 19th and 20th May 1989, with the theme: "Towards a Democratic Welfare System – Options and Strategies".

- (3) Maputo Conference from 9th to 15th April 1990, hosted by the Medical School in Maputo, Mozambique with the theme: "Health and Welfare in Transition". Jointly organised by the Ministry of Health, Maputo, the African National Congress, progressive health and welfare organisations in South Africa, Committee for Health in Southern Africa, Anti-Apartheid Movement in the UK, and the WHO Collaborative Centre for Community-Based Health Sciences Education of the University of New Mexico.
- (4) On 19th-21st July 1991 at the University of the Western Cape, the First Joint National Conference was held with the theme: "People's Health and Social Services". Organised and hosted by the Health Workers' Society, National Medical and Dental Association, the Organisation for Appropriate Social Services in Southern Africa, the Progressive Primary Health Network, the South African Health Workers' Congress and participants of the Social Workers' Forum.
- (5) See previous Footnote (2)
- (6) Hosted by the School of Social Work at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg and the Concerned Social Workers Group, on 21st and 22nd June 1991. This was a Regional Consultative Conference on: National Reconstruction and Social Development.

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