

UNEMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL POLICY DIMENSIONS

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Introduction

Unemployment is a serious problem. Many people are looking for jobs and cannot find while others have given up looking altogether. Millions of people are also employed part time while they prefer to work full time. Associated with these conditions are economic deprivation, social strain, psychological stress and physical health problems (Sherraden 1985). In all countries, services are not adequate to meet the needs of the unemployed. In some countries, especially in Africa, there are very isolated or no services at all for the unemployed.

Definition and types of unemployment

Unemployment is often defined as people actively looking for jobs. However, in some countries such as the US only those who have actively searched for jobs in the last four weeks and have not worked at all are considered unemployed (Persell 1987; Keefe 1984). What is not reflected in the dimensions of unemployment are those who move from full time to part time employment; those who take new jobs which are below their skill levels and previous income; those who move from one temporary low-wage employment to another, and those who are permanently discouraged from looking for employment. The unemployment rate does not show the instability generated by displacement and downward socio-economic mobility. Also not reflected are the anger, insecurity, violence, deprivation, loss opportunities and loss of control of significant aspects of the environment (Keefe 1984).

Thus, there are personal and interpersonal costs of unemployment. These include, for example, socio-psychological costs such as loss of self esteem, feeling of powerlessness, and a sense of loss of identity. There are, therefore, social, economic health and other costs for the family, individual and community (Persell 1986).

Unemployment is caused by several factors including:

1. Inflation, reflect by high prices and wages;
2. efforts to slow inflation including high interest rates, and slow growth in the supply of money in circulation; and

3. globalization of world economy, capital flight, cheap imports and tax breaks for multinationals.

Sherraden (1985) maintains that social workers must sufficiently involve themselves in labour market issues and develop credibility to influence the policy making process; and effectively familiarize themselves with the subject matter which is essentially economic to produce an effective policy to deal with unemployment. There is need to develop conceptual clarity with respect to the nature of unemployment which is of several types.

Sherraden (1985) identifies four non-overlapping types of unemployment.

1. **Frictional unemployment:** This is caused by short term maladjustments in the labour market such as fluctuations in labour market demands. It results from capital and labour shifts, which are seen as essential features of a dynamic economy.
2. **Structural unemployment:** This relates to deeper and longer-lasting maladjustments in the labour market. It reflects inconsistencies between skills required and those possessed by available workers. For example, - some structural job vacancies may exist because of the skills required while some people are unemployed.
3. **Cyclical unemployment:** This is caused by deficiencies in labour demand due to recession. In short, as business declines, unemployment rises. It is therefore the difference between peak and low levels of the business cycle.
4. **Chronic unemployment:** This relates to employment deficiencies that persist irrespective of how the economy performs (i.e., even during good economic times) the economy may still not be able to absorb available labour.

Unemployment must be measures by type so as to be able to describe it accurately for effective policy. For example, whereas frictional unemployment may require policy on labour market sources of information, structural unemployment calls for jobs training type of policy. It is necessary that basic data on types of unemployment be available, and regularly collected. There is need to develop detailed knowledge of types of unemployment as a basis for accurate analysis of unemployment problems.

Social Policy and Unemployment

Social policies are guiding principles for ways of life, motivated by basic and perceived human needs. They evolve from the structures, dynamics and values of the ways of life and serve to sustain or change these ways of life (Gil 1990, p. 23). The central role of policy in reducing or controlling unemployment, and in resolving related problems cannot be under estimated, neither can it be ignored. The importance of policy is reflected by Gil's (1990) conception that social policy regulates and sustains social orders through regulating existential processes es-

sential to the survival and viability of a society. These processes are:

1. Development and control of natural resources and human created material and non-material wealth.
2. Organization of work necessary for production and distribution of provisions suitable for sustaining life and enhancing its quality.
3. Definition, recognition and distribution of civil, social, psychological, political, and economic rights.
4. Procedures for making decisions and for conducting societal affairs (Gil 1990).

Through regulating these processes, social policy indirectly shapes the circumstances of living and quality of life of members of a society. Thus the issue of unemployment is directly linked to the policy regime of a society.

Social Policy and the Right to Work

Gil (1981) argues that societal dominant values are crucial to the development and stabilization of social policies. Values are a product of human choice which are rooted in needs and reflect human interests. Thus, if changes in established institutional order are to come about, there must be significant shifts in value dimensions. Societal processes establish and sanction the rights of members in that society. Therefore, rights are non-existent unless they are socially acknowledged and defined, and appropriate resources allocated. There are differences between needs and rights. For example, everyone needs food, shelter and education. However millions of people suffer from lack of these. This is because their needs have not been acknowledged as rights and hence they have no legitimate claim against society's stock of goods and services. Rights are established explicitly or implicitly by allocating resources to satisfy needs, either on individual or group basis. Work has become necessary in all societies as the process of gaining life enhancing resources and hence it is regulated through social policies. In the context of employment, which is another dimension of work, several policy issues arise including the right and freedom to work, and their implications.

There is no unconditional right to work. Even though such right is not denied, it is, however, controlled by policy regulations which determine ownership and control of resources. The use of these resources translate into work. Gil (1990) indicates that because access to work of majority of people depends on those who control societal wealth and resources, there is no right to work in the real sense. Employment and decision of owners of resources depend on considerations of profit and capital accumulation. These considerations are seen as contrary to the concept of right to work because surplus labour depresses wages, among other things. Gil (1990) maintains further that the limitations on the right to work has led to limitations in income and on economic, social, political and psychological rights, all of which are closely

tioned to income. In addition, work itself has become an exploitative activity.

The right to work has serious implications for policy irrespective of how it is defined. If it refers to universal entitlement to rational and meaningful activity conducive to self-actualization, then societal systems of resource control and utilization must be redesigned. However, if it means merely assuring everyone a position in the existing system, then it must be understood in humanistic terms and only marginal adjustments in current systems would be needed. In this case, if the dominant values shift significantly towards equity, liberty, cooperation and collective orientation, the conception and organization of work and employment will also change dramatically. The way society relates to, and uses resources will change since everyone must have access to the social wealth and be able to utilize but not own, accumulate and control it. This does not seem to be feasible since it implies a public guarantee against domination and exploitation. In short, a social system that oppresses people must be radically transformed. Work for everyone also implies a democratic process of governance at all levels, and calls for participatory processes and procedures (Gil 1990).

Constitutional Guarantee for Employment and Income

A constitutional guarantee for employment means full employment or a guarantee income for all. This implies an economic bill of rights, as a component to political and civil rights which must be guaranteed by the national constitution. Full employment also means there will be no reserve army of labour. This, in essence, will reduce internal competition and the sense of insecurity which employees are usually subjected to. Again, it implies abolishing the reserved army of labour and reducing internal competition and divisions. Full employment is a challenge to the socio-economic status quo. It tests the limits of liberal capitalism as it exists currently, and focuses on an equalitarian participation in production based on capacities and the corresponding rights to share in societal wealth and resources. Basically, it implies mass participation in shaping, controlling and creating policies, and accepts the view that unemployment is incompatible with human dignity, needs, rights and responsibilities (Gil 1990).

Strategies to Assure full Employment

According to Gil (1990) strategies for full employment must include:

1. Adjustment of the average length of the working day, week or year to match the size of the work force and the number of work positions. For example, by reducing working hour, more people can be employed without changing the scope and substance of production.
2. Changing the scope of production by focusing on unmet human needs through publicly sponsored programmes. These projects could then be adjusted depending on the size of the work force.

3. Recognizing the work done by all those working but are not officially recognized, for example, caring for the sick, the children and the elderly; if such activities were defined as work, then the care givers could be rewarded accordingly.

These measures require a political agenda concerned with the redefining, reorganization, redesigning of work and recomposition of the social product of work. However, it is difficult to address these issues since in the absence of employment and income security, people tend to protect whatever employment they have. Employment has both social and economic roles and hence the alleviation of unemployment is as much a social issue as an economic one, and both dimensions must be present in all unemployment services and programme (Hill 1988). Policy dealing with unemployment, in the first place, must make provisions for unemployment mapping with the aim of identifying the professions, regions, age groups, etc., which are hardest hit by unemployment (Persell 1987). Mechanisms must also be created for identifying gaps in the national employment picture so as to design programmes to meet the needs of the hardcore unemployed (Moss 1982).

Coleman and Cressey (1987) emphasize the desirability of employment for all which can be achieved through job creation, expanded public assistance, guaranteed annual income and organizing the poor and forming coalitions to push for change. Effective employment services may contribute to the development of a healthy economy. To sustain a healthy economy, policies must also include the provision of help and training for the unemployed, specific employment services for disabled employees and vocational and employment assistance for youths. Adult workers must also be retrained to move to new jobs (Hill 1988).

On the whole, there is the need for specific targeted programmes other than general economic measures. The unemployed must therefore be the focus of innovative policies and programmes which address the conditions and side effects of joblessness. In addition, mechanisms and procedures for working with employers to change their traditional employment/personnel practices are necessary (Hill 1988; Moss 1982). Even though targeted approaches are seen as more cost effective, measures must be taken to ensure that the unemployed, rather than businesses become the direct and immediate beneficiaries of policies to promote employment (Briar 1983). The unemployed must be the focus of innovative policies and programs which address the conditions and side effects of joblessness. Guaranteed jobs must also be the objective of policies and programmes. The cost effectiveness of such guarantees may be reflected in increased productivity, a strong tax base and increased revenues. Measures to ensure human recovery as well as economic recovery must also be instituted. Employment policies must create a set of services which include a system of health, employment and training and retraining security. A broad agenda that ensures a continuum of employment and training programmes is therefore called for. Policy must also seek to address the emotional, financial or family crisis of the unemployed workers.

Writes such as Sherraden (1985) and Briar (1983) point to the important role that social work can and must play in the efforts to respond to the problem of unemployment. Social workers,

among other activities, must help to find proper and accurate language to describe chronic unemployment in a way that will induce solution; collect systematic data to assess unemployment by type to aid correct diagnosis of unemployment; intensify the documentation of the negative human effects of chronic unemployment for the public, policy makers and politicians; emphasize the socio-economic costs of chronic unemployment more strongly - i.e., both the direct economic costs in terms of revenue costs to both the public and the individual and the indirect costs such as increased in crime, alcohol use and deflated self-image; and find new long term solutions since old ones are ineffective (i.e., create employment opportunities in a variety of ways to enable, for example, the chronically unemployed to participate); plan future employment and training programme with a view of broadening the agenda to include responsibility for the development of a continuum of employment and training programmes; and develop policy measures and programmes to address the emotional, financial and family crises of unemployed worker. Social workers must therefore, improve their knowledge of local labour markets and vocational assessment techniques in order to be effective in this area.

Conclusion

Unemployment is more than the absence of jobs. It is associated with several social problems and hence it is increasingly viewed as social injustice. It does not only affect social, economic and psychological functioning but also life expectation and well being (Briar 1987). It has, therefore, become a question of fundamental human rights, and a central social worker issue because of its effects such as lack of income, lost self-esteem, depression and futility (Briar 1987).

The idea that people have a right to job is not new. For example, it has been discussed in the US since the 1930s. Associated with this is also the principle that no one should suffer from lack of work. However, the implementation of full employment policies has not been pursued in the face of concerns for inflation and the influence of trickle down economic growth and benefits policies. Jobs and incomes concerns have become a function of the economy as opposed to direct and specific government intervention.

Unemployment poses a major challenge to the social workers who must address not only the unemployment situation but also the associated hardships. In this regard, they must join the efforts to understand the different dimensions of unemployment, systematically document the effects of unemployment on families, communities and individuals, and initiate efforts to influence the development of appropriate policies and the values or thinking behind such policies.

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