

# **Inequality and Underdevelopment: Issues for a Social Development Curriculum**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Previous governmental policies in South Africa created a situation where institutional poverty fostered inequality and divisions on a racial, gender and class levels. The author examines the context of social work practice in this country with this historical legacy in mind. He points out that previous social work roles were compromised by the fact that social workers were forced to operate within this inequitable system and assist people in adapting to the status quo. Following the recent changes new roles are called for under the Reconstruction and Development Programme.

The paper traces the context of social work practice in South Africa and the contradictions faced by social workers between the service function and the social control function. It outlines a rationale for a social development curriculum in a country that seeks to redress the economic and political injustices of the past.

## **Introduction**

This paper reflects on issues of inequality as a social and moral problem that has plagued South Africa for more than three centuries. It attempts to forward suggestions for introducing a social work curriculum that will incorporate issues of international social development in a South African university. South Africa is part of a global economy and issues that affect it should be viewed in a broader perspective and in relation to its implications for the world. The profession of social work is being challenged to respond quickly, through adequate preparation of its students for appropriate practice in the country and an informed input in similar world issues.

The argument that is put forward is that there can be no proper human and social development in South Africa without the redress of past injustices of which the social disease of inequality is one. The view that is adopted in this paper, is that the ideology of apartheid, that promoted inequality, influenced social development and afflicted the majority of the people in this country, destroyed the fabric of

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society, family and community life. It prevented a select population of the people from maximising their potential within a just society. Now that South Africa is governed by a government of national unity, that provides human and individual rights for all, social work departments face a challenge of relevance in the training of human resources.

## Conceptualisation of the Problem

The concept of inequality is used to explain a variety of situations, eg gender, political, economic, and power inequality. Literature on this concept of inequality abounds. It is viewed as an institution, a moral phenomenon, in the sense that people evaluate each other on the basis of their differences and in a structural manner. There is no moral justification for such differentiation in human society. This institution of inequality is not only harmful but unjust as it ranks people in the access to livelihood resources and power.

Myrdal (1970) argues that inequality is brought about by economic and social stratification. As a result people who come from underdeveloped countries suffer from:

*"...undernutrition, malnutrition, lack of elementary health and educational facilities; extremely bad housing conditions and sanitation" (p54).*

Inequality is socially engineered to prevent the majority from competing freely and equally with the minority that hold political, social and economic power, which consequently results in economic suffering.

In South Africa, it became important for the past government to entrench social inequality between genders through the subordination of African women. It also became important to divide people according to ethnic groups to promote fear across racial lines and hinder strife for real change. Past policies in South Africa have fostered inequality and have not promoted equality. It is clear from the perspective of scholars of social policy that it was to the interest of the past South African government to favour the promulgation of these policies that were oppressive to the African population.

Myrdal (1970) argues that inequality and the trend toward rising inequality stands as a complex of inhibitions and obstacles to development and that consequently, there is an urgent need for reversing the trend and creating greater equality as a condition for speeding up development.

In spite of it being an immoral phenomenon in society, inequality continues to be pervasive, especially in the modern world. However, the form that it has taken in South Africa defies any human imagination. Through this notion of inequality,

not only had people divided according to racial groups and classes, but this division was a source of all human suffering, and a threat to human and societal survival. Poverty, especially of women and children, continues to be of concern to a variety of professionals – not the least social workers. The increasing number of female-headed households has sharpened the focus on the poverty of this population. Women, in pre-colonial times were central to the economy of their households. With their current marginalisation, many an African family is unnecessarily poor.

The gap between white and black; rich and poor is still pronounced in South Africa, in spite of the political changes that have taken place in the country. The gap is obvious not only in the distribution of income and wealth, but in social ills and social problems. McKendrick et al (1992:116) argued that:

*"...apartheid (that brings about this gap) is maintained at a high price over and above the heavy human toll in human degradation and indignity".*

They stated that, in this country, life expectancy of (African) males is 52 years and females, 55 years; the infant mortality rate is eighty per one thousand. This rate is two times that of coloureds, four times that of Asians and seven times that of whites in South Africa. The median family income of whites is double that of Asians; three times that of coloureds and eight times that of Africans. The literacy rate (of Africans) is forty-six per one hundred. They cite Wilson and Ramphela who claim that:

*"...in terms of the Gini coefficient – a measure of disparity between the rich and the poor, in a society, South Africa has the world's highest measure of inequality".*

This situation is not about to be corrected.

## **The Context of Social Work Practice in South Africa**

McKendrick (1990) contended that South African social work students were educated to practice in a context that is based on differentiation characterised by fragmentation and unequal service provision: *"The contemporary social welfare system is based on racial division and a rejection of socialism"*. McKendrick further highlighted the fact that South Africans who are best protected by social security and most adequately aided by personal social services are the white group. This status quo has yet to change in South Africa today.

The Population Registration Act (30/1950) introduced categories into which people had to be classified. In terms of the Group Areas Act (41/1950), each group could live only in separately allocated areas. This racial separation led to unequal

services, with the groups that comprise the bulk of the population in need (80%) "*...receiving the smallest slice of the cake*" (McKendrick, 1990:2).

The present population in South Africa is estimated at 36 million, with the Africans constituting the majority (80%) of this figure. An estimated fifty-four percent is illiterate. This status quo has created a scenario of a population that is not adequately skilled for available positions in the labour market. As the economy of the country has slumped in the 'eighties and 'nineties, this has created a generation of unemployed people and hence growing poverty and crime.

Authors who have written on political economy and social welfare policies (eg Moscovitch & Drover, 1981) regard moral injustices and inequalities as perpetuating problems of poverty, unemployment and illiteracy. There is nowhere where these arguments find justification and are more clearly reflected than in the South African context. Illiteracy for Africans was perpetuated by lack of consistency in the education policy in the country. Whereas education for every white, coloured and Asian child was a right, enforced by compulsory and free education, for African children education was an option, a privilege, complicated by few schools, education that parents should pay for and mostly unqualified teachers, especially in rural areas. It is not surprising that most parents did not opt to educate their children, because education was viewed as a drain on meagre economic resource.

Social workers found themselves, in most instances, having to cope with the impact of this political imbalance. Their activities mostly involved devising strategies for African families to survive the policies that were designed to deliberately keep them in the lowest status level of the population. They wittingly or unwittingly became allies by working within the insidious policies, administration and the world view of the government of the country. Their participation in "development" as social workers continued to be viewed as nothing more than a collusion with the elite to accept living (for the majority) without any, or inadequate resources. In short the maxim has been to educate people to continue to do without.

Social workers experience a contradiction between the service function and the social control function which leads them to play roles of the oppressed and the oppressor. For example, they played a significant role in the determination of eligibility of resources (means testing); management of clients through various rules and regulations; interpretation of societal problems as personal problems (eg the effects of work, alienation, etc), which places the responsibility on the individual for the problems. Any type of financial assistance, if any, is channelled through an authority relationship which demands that the client abide by the set rules, ie, the means test. For example, to qualify for what is referred to as a maintenance grant, any African woman has to prove that she has no male guardian, father, husband, brother or son, to maintain her.

Social workers reinforced the policies of the state through continued implementation of the social policies without effort toward changing them. They served as a means of social control over the resultant disillusionment of the people, which most often erupted into violence or crime, and by their silence about oppressive legislation. Their incorporation into the system removed social workers from looking at issues, to defining problems in affective or emotional terms. These policies and rules humiliate people and make their work as social workers undignified. By implementing policies of inequality they become parties to the government's 'development'. Furthermore, through utilising micro approaches, they constrict their role and "...provide a framework for defining services and controlling the victims" (Moscovitch & Drover, 1981).

The Reconstruction and Development policy enacted by the Government of National Unity calls for the review of the:

*"existing pool of social service workers and their conditions of service...many social workers must be reorientated and retrained within a developmental approach to social welfare" (1994:56).*

The profession can provide a transformation in the current status quo through taking a position in society and abandoning neutrality and conservatism. Knowledge about inhibiting policies and issues of development seem to be indicated for any training institution that is in a so-called "developing country".

## **Rationale for a Social Development Curriculum in South Africa**

Social workers have long been challenged by Jane Adams (1930), who stated that there is a superior role for them other than remaining to care for the victimised (in Fraser, et al, 1991). This, to my mind, was not meant to minimise the role of the micro approaches in social work, but to challenge the profession to move ahead to areas of conflict, where the struggle must be pressed to bring about an order of society with fewer victims. Furthermore, Hamilton, in Specht (1968:35), in illuminating the issue further, argued that:

*"...one cannot successfully solve problems of interrelationships without a sound economic and political structure. All social work practice has political implications whether or not they are recognised".*

Social work education in South Africa has modelled itself against Western values that emphasise individuality, that is not necessarily the experience of all Africa and its people. The focus of training is micro in orientation with limited attempts to focus on the macro approaches. Furthermore, because students are trained only for

beginning practice within the profession, (ie offering a BA in Social Work), the perspective that has been adopted by all the universities in the country is generalist in nature. These models that have been utilised have not, in short, adequately met and served the socio-political and economic needs of the country's majority.

The state of social work education has led the profession to be viewed not only as conservative and neutral, but as an instrument of domination and control over the majority of people as a means of furthering the apartheid policy. Many a committed social worker has been frustrated to be motivated to look for alternative contexts for practice, eg within labour unions, political and church organisations.

If social work education is to be relevant and address the needs of the people being served, crucial issues of the curriculum need to be examined and implemented. While social work literature from the European and other western countries is vital, indigenous material seems to be indicated to sensitise students about local problems and needs of people of a developing country that South Africa is.

The focus of training should be on empowering students with skills that will enable them to play a significant role that will change the institutional patterns of South Africa. Bernstein & Gray (1991:251) have argued that social work students need to be conscientised about the inequities of apartheid and prepared for the post-apartheid era. This statement emanates from the fact that the experiences of all the students of social work, black and white, are so very different. This focus can be achieved through reflecting on issues of international social development, that promote particular sets of values – eg, concern for justice and equity.

One of the decisions to be made in re-defining social work education is training for leadership; offering programmes that will relate to need-based problems of South Africa in general, and of Africans in particular as the most marginalised sector of the community. These problems pertain to inequality and poverty. This means a deliberate effort in curriculum design to encompass social development issues. Focus should be on training social work specialists who will effectively discharge their function. The process will not be an easy one, but with South Africa's commitment to change, and with interested colleagues in South Africa and abroad, who want to be part of a new South Africa, this process seems to be feasible.

There is a place for the social development curriculum even at a beginning level of practice for social work students. There have been arguments that specialist training cannot be offered at undergraduate level. Boehm, in Dinerman & Geismar (1991:97), for example, has reiterated that training at undergraduate level provides: *"...foundation knowledge and the specialist role...is impracticable"*. However, beginning knowledge of social development could form part of the social work curriculum in South Africa. Active recruitment of students for a higher level of education has not been pursued in the past by social work departments or schools.

Furthermore, very few schools have taught programmes at MSW level in the country, and even fewer PhD programmes. The schools offer mostly individualised programmes, mainly thesis writing at post-graduate level. If higher social work education is pursued in earnest, the social development curriculum could be developed further to provide areas of specialisation in the field.

## Fitting Social Development into the Social Work Curriculum

For any effort to incorporate the social development content into a social work curriculum to succeed, there needs to be an agreed upon and common conceptualisation of this term. There have been extensive discussions in the literature about what social development means. However, there is no standardised or universally accepted meaning. Meinert & Kohn (1987:7) contend that there are many reasons why it is difficult to operationalise social development. They suggest three reasons that include:

- its normative/value-laden focus;
- its interdisciplinary nature that brings a unique perspective to the definitional process, and
- its dynamic and processual quality that deals with integrated social components which do not lend themselves to mainstream quantitative methods of study.

These authors argue that this concept has been discussed from the personal to the global, rather than the other way around.

Ekins' view is that social and human development is predicated on key social factors that include, *inter alia*, the following:

- “political and social commitment to equity
- equitable distribution and access to public health
- uniform access to the educational system with a focus on the primary level
- availability of adequate nutrition at all levels of society in a manner that does not inhibit indigenous agricultural activity” (1992:3a).

His argument is that poverty and disease do not stem from inadequate resources, or from overpopulation in current times, but from unfair distribution of resources, knowledge and power, which always appears to be in the hands of a few.

A conception of social development that appears to address the issues that face South Africa today, seems to be the one propounded by Farris (1987) which views development within a normative framework and that emphasises the necessity of a reciprocal relationship between a person and the collectivity. It further emphasises the value of equal respect of all people. His view of a socially developed

country is one that attempts to eliminate the economic and political conditions that prevent or are the opposite of such equal respect. He cites Jurgen Habermas who views social development as:

*"...related to the elimination of certain forms of exploitation ...bodily harm (hunger, illness), then personal injury (degradation, servitude, fear), and finally spiritual desperation (loneliness, emptiness) – for well being and security, freedom and dignity, happiness and fulfilment" (1987:43).*

Care should be taken not to regard social development as a finished product but as a process of being.

Curricula issues of social development should be based on values associated with social development and objectives that the school seek to achieve. As previously outlined, the problems of social development in South Africa, ie, social, economic and political inequalities that lead to the disenfranchisement of the majority, mainly stem from the apartheid ideology and the country's colonial past.

Estes (1992) proposes several values that are central to social development, viz, conscientisation; distributive justice; non-exploitative rationality; de-tribalisation; co-operation; the emergence of humanocracy and participation. These values are or should be basic for any social development curriculum, especially in a country that has been characterised so much by its emphasis on differentiation. These differences, it should be emphasised in educating social work students, should be a source of *"national strength and vitality"* (Estes, 1992).

The objectives for social development education should be, *inter alia*:

- a) broadening awareness in students of the socioeconomic and political systems and how they have promoted and sustained inequality and poverty in our country;
- b) facilitating the critical analyses of policies and problems in the country that maintain social injustice and inequality, so that they can be motivated to action;
- c) helping promote humanitarian values that will sustain any effort toward social development;
- d) promoting action toward the elimination of poverty, that is people-centered and looks toward global interdependence.

This approach, if fitted into the curriculum, would liberate social work students from the hegemony of micro approaches that have tended to dominate social work



training and practice in South Africa. It would, further, promote fuller participation of the oppressed masses so that they access needed resources and cease to be viewed as objects but become subjects in their own right. Healy (1992) emphasises the following key foundation components in a development curriculum:

- Human Behaviour/Social Environment: This subject focuses on the interaction between human behaviour and social, cultural and political contexts of practice.
- Special Populations: focusing on women, children, the disabled and other disadvantaged populations.
- Social Welfare Policy: focusing on analyses of economic and social policies.
- Practice: focusing on development skills.
- Ethics and the Profession.

Based on this notion then, the social development curriculum should include:

- basic assumptions about human beings, their nature and capability;
- theories about human relationships and actions – compare what exists in South Africa and elsewhere in the world;
- theories of development that appear to be relevant to the context of South Africa. These should include the social, economic and political perspectives;
- analysis of these policies that impact on human lives;
- poverty and hunger issues; gender inequality; children's issues; social justice and human rights issues;
- national and global contexts of afore-mentioned issues;
- strategic planning for intervention.

It is the responsibility of the profession to train and prepare social workers to understand and perceive parameters of practice and to engage in social action. Social work students should understand issues of inequality and how they strip people of their dignity and degrade them. They should be able to meet the demands that are social, political and economic that afflict the majority of the people

Estes (1992:11) states that there is an increased push within the profession to concentrate on the social, political and economic issues as they affect the masses of people in any country. He contends that the greatest challenge of the profession is to:

- address issues of inequality, injustice and human degradation;
- acknowledge that without social justice and equity in any country, there can be no social development, nor in turn, human development;
- mobilise the unique body of knowledge, values and skills that can positively impact upon the world social situation.

All this knowledge could be located and infused within the BSW courses, especially those that have a macro perspective, ie community organisation, planning and administration. A major part of the practicum, especially for the third and fourth years of the undergraduate training, could be on developing skills that expand knowledge of community mobilisation and action. Students could also be encouraged to undertake research projects that promote issues of social development. A possibility of developing a taught Master's programme could promote these ideas even further. Students at the Master's level could specialise in this field, allowing them to crystallise the issues involved in social development in South Africa. Hopefully policy issues could result from these deliberations.

## Conclusion

The paper has attempted to outline what is considered human injustice in South Africa, that takes the form of social, economic, and political inequality. The major thrust of the paper has been to indicate how a school of social work could incorporate a social development curriculum, to come to terms with the conceptualised problems in the country.

These reflections indicate that the problems in South Africa cannot be solved without taking into consideration basic global issues of inequality and poverty, and how this country contributes to continuing oppression of the masses.

There is a continuing pressure for change in the world, but more so for South Africa. At present, this country can be considered to be in transition, and hence the need to concern ourselves with a curriculum that is relevant for the social work profession, to allow it to contribute and promote such needed change for the better in the country.

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