

Community Development: Has Social Work met the Challenge?

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Introduction

Sixteen years ago the Sixth Annual Conference of South African Lecturers in Social Work addressed the issue of community development: can social workers meet the challenge? (Hare, 1972) Clarification of the definition of community development and community organisation was sought. Dunham's (1970) now well known definition of the latter was quoted, being the "adjustment between needs and resources". Community development was seen as a broader process of which community organisation was a part and related to the involvement of the community in its own development through participation and self-direction. Further, the issue of training for community development and the role of the community development worker was discussed. Finally, opportunities for field instruction were suggested, the aim being to heighten student interest in, and awareness of, this method of social work, since before then preference had been shown for case and group work.

With the advent of the Gulbenkian Foundation Report, the term *community organisation* was replaced by the term *community work*, in Britain any way, and this new terminology was readily adopted in South Africa. Community work was defined as an umbrella term describing a change process which occurred on three levels, namely, the grassroots, interagency and planning levels. Theoreticians increasingly made a distinc-

tion between casework, now called direct or clinical practice, and community work, now called indirect or community practice (Zastrow, 1986). Groupwork could fall into either ambit depending on the purpose for which the groups were formed (Glasser and Garvin, 1977).

The recommendations of the 1972 Conference mentioned at the outset were, for the most part, fulfilled. All South African Schools of Social Work include community work in their curricula. Universities have endeavoured to provide field instruction for students in this method of social work. The social work profession plays a role in policy formation and to a lesser extent, in social action. However, social workers have failed to meet the challenge in that they have not become extensively involved in grassroots community development despite the changing focus in curriculum development. This paper attempts to find reasons for social work's failure to meet the challenge, advances suggestions as to how it might be achieved and examines the realities facing the community development worker in South Africa today.

Why has social work failed to meet the challenge?

Social work has tended to concentrate its activities in the developed context where most social work agencies operate, that is, in the urban context where resources exist and one can talk about adjustments between needs and resources. This is the context of community organisation, not of community development. Consequently, social work neglects the area of greatest need, the rural areas where the bulk of our population

lives. Many factors have contributed to this trend, among them the subsidy structure, the failure of policy makers and service providers within social work to allocate funds for community development, social workers' concern with upward mobility, professional status and favourable work and service conditions (Gray and Russell, 1988).

A major reason for social work's failure to meet the challenge is that jobs for social workers in rural areas are few and far between. To attract social workers to these areas, incentives (such as housing) would have to be provided. Further, universities would have to pay far more attention in their social work courses to preparing students for work in this context. Education for social work has tended to follow Western traditions which favour the developed context and to prepare students for clinical practice in government and private welfare organisations. Here the career structure of social workers distances them from the communities which they serve. Accountability is to the organisation or agency and not to the client community.

Consequently, considerable effort is invested within the organisation rather than in the community. Furthermore, the community is not in a position to sanction the work of the social worker. Clearly alternative settings and forms of intervention are needed for the developing context. This is the area where scope exists for the indigenisation of South African social work and for social workers to meet the challenge of community development, but it is a formidable task.

The realities facing the community development worker

Community development embodies the concepts of social justice and equality, and is a peaceful attempt to bring about meaningful change in people's lives in such a way that they have a high degree of control and participation (Hall, 1986). However, it is not the only key to change in South Africa. Whilst there is no denying the value of participation and people's involvement in change efforts, serious lasting structural change cannot be achieved without strong

state backing and considerable financial input. There is a dilemma in that the state's "reform" programmes have pledged such backing, yet local "recipient" communities mistrust officials since they are excluded from any decision-making. There is also a feeling in many quarters that the "system" cannot be reformed and that a radical rearrangement is necessary. For the community development worker to be successful in this context, he/she would have to have the trust and support of local people and be seen to be "one of them". Grassroots programmes running simultaneously with state initiatives require the input of skilled indigenous workers. Parallel changes at the community and national level are needed to provide the impetus for development and change in South Africa.

Community intervention follows a guiding principle which involves identifying and collaborating with existing leadership at the grassroots level. While this is a sound community development principle, it is extremely difficult to apply in South Africa. There is an uneasy self-consciousness with regard to leadership. The character of local leadership and its relationship with the state is confused. Many black communities have attempted to resist the "long-arm" of the central power and, in the process, the character and image of local authority structures has been dramatically altered. The penetration of indigenous local leadership structures, and in several instances, the co-option of these structures by agents of the state, has largely resulted in suspicion of, and opposition to, them. Alternative "democratic" structures have been systematically repressed by the state. Since existing leadership does not enjoy popular legitimacy and alternative leadership is not permitted to develop, this has resulted in a leadership vacuum.

This situation is far more prevalent in urban and peri-urban areas than in rural areas. The practice of community development in such a context is fraught with difficulties. The "state approved leaders", while not enjoying the support of the community, are sometimes in a powerful position with the distribution of scarce resources. They are, in a sense, negatively powerful through their

ability to withhold or divert needed resources. Because the resources the community is provided with by the state are usually woefully inadequate, the leaders are not in a position to facilitate positive development. In this way, they are prevented from outgrowing their dependence on the state and establishing their bona fide leadership within the community.

Rural communities are socially and politically isolated because they are powerless. Rural black people have relatively little education, are distanced from the centre of power and feel unable to influence change. Historically, they have not been involved in decision making. This is particularly true of rural women. Their access to decision-making forums is extremely limited. They are not consulted by the tribal authority and the men are frequently away working in the towns. Urban communities, on the other hand, are more dramatically affected by socio-political events in the country, than are rural communities. Although more resources exist in these communities and household incomes are higher, they are still grossly inadequate. Social workers working in these areas also feel immobilised and powerless (Muller, 1988).

What can social workers do to meet the challenge?

In the first place a decision has to be made as to whether social work wants to meet the challenge of community development. Perhaps the time has come to acknowledge that the place of social work is in the industrialised urban context. In so doing, recognition would be given to the career aspirations of social workers and energy directed towards furthering the interests of the profession, guaranteeing its justified and valuable role in society through the institution of social welfare. Duplicity and uncertainty as to the role of social work in community development coupled with the reluctance of social workers to forsake the urban context makes for an apologetic and defensive stance regarding the role of social work in society. A decision one way or the other will affirm the right of social workers to make the choices

they are making and give them a sense of direction and purpose.

There are two options : either social workers become directly involved in community development and receive the education and training needed to prepare them for this context or, they become indirectly involved in the training of indigenous para-professionals prepared to fill this service vacuum. There are several advantages to the latter. The value system of the indigenous worker matches that of the community; consistent findings in the field of community mental health have demonstrated that non-professionals in a helping role can offer equal or better services than professionals (Ben-Tovin, 1982, as cited by Buch, 1987); indigenous work is inextricably woven into the fabric of the community; and it would help meet the shortage of professionally trained social workers in South Africa. Existing social work agencies, were they to pursue community development, could make it incumbent upon social workers in their employ to develop training programmes for indigenous workers making it possible for agency services to reach more remote communities where they are most needed. Broadening of services in this manner would require the allocation of funds for alternative community-based programmes. It would also require a change in philosophy with accountability to local communities rather than the agency hierarchy. The agency would become the launching pad for services which, once they were established, would belong to the community. Policy for such programme development would have to be formulated. The policy should include two vital principles, namely that funds be deployed in such a way that they become income-generating and that projects involve the training of local people so that they might assume responsibility for their own programmes.

The challenge re-issued

The dilemma in the South African context is that the state reform initiatives are inextricably interwoven with the fabric of community development and are couched in these terms. Adopting this as a social work

strategy then carries the risk of being misconstrued as identification with the status quo. Community development programmes can be placed along a continuum from community supportive to community oppressive (Werner, 1980, as cited by Buch, 1987):

(1) At the one end of the continuum, community supportive programmes are those which favourably influence the long range welfare of the community. They help it become selfsufficient and genuinely encourage responsibility, initiative, decision-making and selfreliance at the community level. In so doing, they build on human dignity.

(2) At the other end of the continuum, community oppressive programmes are those which, while invariably paying lip service to other aspects of community input, are fundamentally authoritarian, paternalistic, or are carried out in such a way that they actually encourage greater dependency, servility and unquestioning acceptance of outside regulations and decisions. In the long run such programmes are crippling to the dynamics of the community.

Looking at the process of community development as a socio-political process, one sees the promotion of community development programmes as "good" services despite the politically unfavourable situation of oppression and economic and social control. Unpopular services are forced on people who remain uninformed. Thus the potentially explosive effects of perpetuating inequality are neutralised (Buch, 1987).

Social work needs to become identified with community supportive programmes which strive for the goals of social justice – a more equitable distribution of social resources and community empowerment. Control remains a key issue. However, it is not control over people but control by people over their own lives and circumstances. Social work is not concerned with double standards : with providing excellent care for the well-to-do and second-class care for the poor. Social work is concerned with finding appropriate strategies for working with different sectors of the population in keeping with their needs. Hence the more sophisticated, highly technical and largely

clinical services offered by social workers most suit the needs of the more developed context. Social workers do have expertise in this area. They need to be acknowledged for this expertise and accorded their rightful place amongst the other service professions of medicine, law and psychiatry. Therefore, it makes sense that social workers perfect their skills in this area and promote themselves accordingly.

Appropriate strategies for the less developed sector differ markedly from the above. These are the grassroots strategies where social workers need to reach out to communities in the same way as the earliest social work pioneers of the settlement movement did. Conscientising strategies such as empowerment are crucial. Enabling strategies are the accompaniment to providing people with a sense of control. Rendering such services in a non-paternalistic manner which acknowledges the dignity and worth of people is the core of the social work objective. If social workers behave in an elitist and arrogant fashion, or if their pattern of community participation makes lackeys of communities, social work will become identified with those who attempt to practice community development in an oppressive manner forcing unpopular services on the people (Bunch, 1987).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is time that social work agencies acknowledge the needs of the majority of the population. They can do this in several ways:

- 1 by empowering communities, a process which is grounded at the community level.
- 2 by equipping people with essential knowledge and skills to develop and administer programmes at the grassroots level.
- 3 by deploying existing resources in a different manner through involving social workers in the training of indigenous workers and earmarking funds specifically for community development programmes.
- 4 by employing paraprofessionals already trained for community development.

(Continued on p. 69)