COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL WORK

There is some agreement that a social development policy approach is most suited to the South African social, political and economic context where there are enormous disparities in service provision with the developed urban sector receiving the largest slice of the welfare cake (Gray 1993; McKendrick 1990; Patel 1992). Social welfare neglects the poor and the present two-tier system advances different approaches to the established welfare population in urban areas and to the poor, the majority of whom are black and who live in isolated rural communities (RDP 1994). The former are provided with social services, albeit minimal and unequal, while the latter, it is believed, should contribute to their own development through participation and involvement in community development programmes. While in theory community development, with its language of self-determination, participation, involvement and empowerment, cannot be faulted on normative grounds, unless resources, structures and programmes are developed in underdeveloped communities, this will amount to nothing more than empty, political rhetoric.

Community development, within a national social development policy, seems to me hold out the greatest hope for reaching previously neglected populations. Yet, social workers do not have a good track record in grass-roots community development. By and large, social work is seen as an elitist profession, with specialised functions and goals. The image which the majority of social workers have of themselves, and which they project to the wider community, is one of clinical detachment. Yet this image is quite inconsistent with social work's professional values, its view of people and of social justice.

Social workers, for the most part, are concentrated in social work agencies or government departments, both of which are generally rigid, bureaucratic structures, bound by policies, rules and traditions which may not easily be responsive to changing social, political and economic conditions. They are not 'people's organisations' but are controlled and directed by professionals, the community elite and/or government bureaucrats who, due to the inflexibility of the policies and procedures they are required to implement, adopt an authoritarian stance, while clients remain relatively powerless. Clients do not, as a matter of course, have a say in these undemocratic organisations, designed ostensibly, primarily to meet their welfare needs. The democratisation of established institutions may be harder to achieve than the democratisation of the political system. People with vested interests in these organisations, who command enormous financial resources, do not easily let go of their powerful positions. Policy makers remain distanced from service recipients and it is left to middle-line social workers to interpret client needs to decision-makers. The 'forum model' presents a workable alternative in terms of which communication comes via representative channels from the 'bottom-up', whereafter suggested policies are debated by policy-makers in consultation with representatives who are able to speak on behalf of the people to whom the policy directly relates.

With this picture of the context of professional social work practice, one might well ask how social workers are going to be empowered to rise out of the bureaucratic mould in which they have been cast to address the needs of the broader welfare population. Indeed, one must first ask whether this is in fact what social workers want. There is considerable evidence, both locally and internationally, to support the contention that most social workers do clinical work and favour management-oriented roles. While a growing number of politically motivated social workers are trying to break out into community development, they are having to blaze their own path and remain in the minority. For the most part, social work strives to be apolitical and most social workers are renowned for their political conservatism.
In recent years critical (radical and feminist) social work theory has contributed helpful insights into the political nature of social work practice, and of the way in which social work, unintentionally one would hope, contributes to injustice, inequality and oppression in society. It is perhaps through a lack of awareness of their powerful political role that social workers unwittingly maintain the status quo.

I have made a number of sweeping assumptions about social workers and their role in society. I believe that social workers can play a valuable role in reconstruction and social development in South Africa by changing their focus to community development. Yet, I ask the question, is this what they want? Do they have enough power to change the way in which social work is practised in their well established agencies, and do they want to? Will resource providers create structures in local communities and enable social workers to do grass-roots community development, simultaneously providing them with resources and finances to develop grass-roots programmes? Social workers have to earn a living. As long as the bulk of social work jobs are concentrated in established private welfare organisations and state welfare departments, whose major task is to implement national welfare policy relating to children, families, the mentally and physically disabled and the aged, little opportunity will remain for their entry into community development. I do not believe that social workers want to be elitist, neither do I believe that they do not have a role in providing care for children, the mentally and physically disabled and the aged. I am not even saying that social workers do not render the best counselling services currently available. What I am saying, however, is that they need to broaden their services to previously unreached populations. If they could play a major role in community development, they would put social work on the map in this glorious new democratic South Africa of ours!

References

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