

Transforming Social Welfare

A Radical Approach

Ann Ntebe

This article aims to emphasise the importance of having a relevant and acceptable social welfare model, which allows social workers to engage in effective and appropriate professional intervention. A model of this sort will contribute to meeting the challenges facing the South African social work fraternity.

The following should not be seen in isolation, but rather as a contribution to the lengthy discussions on social welfare issues that have taken place at various social work conferences and meetings in and outside South Africa since 1987. The dissatisfactions expressed and the search for constructive alternative proposals are clear indications that social workers, especially those within the progressive fraternity, are in search of a unitary, non-racist, democratic welfare system.

The State Withdraws

The South African welfare system is based on a residual welfare model and operates within a context which has been shaped by decades of apartheid rule. The residual model is based on the assumption that people have the ability to govern themselves, to handle their rights and responsibilities maturely. In essence, it assumes they can take care of their own welfare needs. Thus the state and private welfare machinery will only start helping once people's ability to care for themselves becomes dysfunctional.

State policy documents, such as the October 1990 proposals by the Department of National Health and Population Development, further increase the burden that people and their communities will have to bear. The department is insisting that, "individuals, families and communities be primarily responsible for the financing of welfare services needed for their effective social functioning; government's contribution to welfare provision be reduced, and the burden be shifted to the private sector; and welfare structures be privatised."

Privatisation in social welfare means curtailed state responsibility for welfare services and increased expectations on the business sector to play a major role in the provision of finances for essential services. The government

is putting pressure on welfare organisations to limit their staff intake, thus forcing more social workers to go into private practice. This affects the quality and intensity of services delivered. Welfare organisations are forced to rely on volunteers and have to charge fees for services in order to generate income.

Inadequate, Inappropriate Services

According to the South African Council for Social Work, the statutory body which controls the profession, there are only 7 769 registered social workers rendering services through state and private welfare and community organisations to a population of over 37 million. As a result, one social worker often has to cope with a caseload of 100 families per month in addition to having to do community outreach work. An added concern is that these families are mostly affected by problems such as lack of housing, eviction, unemployment, public violence and associated trauma, poverty, alcohol and drug abuse and physical and sexual abuse. Patel refers to social work relating to these problems as "finding private solutions for public issues".

The consequence of such policies on an economically stressed population is increased political instability and continued social inequality. In addition, state welfare departments have been established on racial lines: the House of Representatives for 'coloured' people; the House of Delegates for Indians; and various regional services councils and local area committees for African people. Valuable, scarce resources are thus spent on a duplicated, fragmented, racially based, bureaucratic structure.

Racial differentiation has strongly entrenched inequalities between welfare beneficiaries, violating a fundamental principle of social justice and human rights, namely equal access to resources. Note, for example, the different pensions that were paid to pensioners of different races. Moreover, welfare assistance is regarded as a privilege rather than a needy citizen's right, thus the added humiliation of a means test in order to qualify for help. The state rationale is that South Africa is not a welfare state.

Dismantling the Old Order

It is my opinion that social workers and the social work fraternity as a whole have to fight tirelessly at drastically changing social welfare practice, theory and policy in order to contribute to South Africa's social transformation. In addition, goals set by the social welfare fraternity can only be achieved if the ruling structures of the country develop the political will to uproot poverty and



Not even Whites can depend on a safety net from the state.

Photo: Photo Workshop

promote healthy living and working conditions for all citizens.

Social workers in progressive structures have already initiated the dismantling process. Historic social work conferences were held in May 1989, April 1990 and June 1991, which involved organisations such as the Social Workers' Forum (Cape Town), South African Black Social Workers (SABSWA), Concerned Social Workers (CSW), the Welfare Policy Committee (Durban) and the Society for Social Workers (Witwatersrand). These organisations have resolved to promote a unitary, non-racial, non-sexist, democratic welfare system and to actively encourage the consumers of social welfare services to participate in decision making. They have agreed to make conscious efforts to dismantle the old welfare order and lay the blocks for the new, one which promotes human rights and acts as a mechanism through which wealth can be redistributed.

In addition, social workers have resolved to become agents of change in the struggle towards social justice and transformation. Social workers, at agencies such as the Child Welfare Society in Natal and Johannesburg and the Cape Mental Health Society in Cape Town, have started to address issues of paramount concern in the apartheid welfare system. In their own organisations, they have begun to desegregate management structures which have tradition

ally been dominated by white, middle class experts. They are starting to tackle racial inequalities in service delivery through strategic planning of future services. Social workers are now also beginning to address the need to use languages appropriate to the people they serve, indigenous to the South African scenario.

In the process of transformation, social workers face many challenges. Resolutions at conferences cannot easily be implemented if there is resistance from agencies and communities which have fallen victim to the 'welfare syndrome'. Social workers will need find ways of meeting these challenges and will, moreover, have to examine their own commitment to this process of change. Paulo Freire commented that social workers, as helping professionals, confronted with a changing environment with varying needs and demands, can never be neutral. This point was echoed by Jay Naidoo of COSATU, who said that social workers must never cease to expose the ways in which "exploitation and oppression create victims".

Radical Change, Not Modification

The challenge to the progressive social welfare fraternity is radical transformation of the residual, fragmented, discriminatory, expensive and individual oriented welfare policy to a unitary, non-racial, democratic and humane one. If the social welfare fraternity is serious about contributing to radical social transformation in South Africa, rather than modifying the system, then it needs to pursue a radical approach.

Radical social work locates the source of welfare 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 their families, and if this leads to snowballing problems, then the source of the problems lies within the market mechanisms rather than individual deviant behaviour. According to Louw, in his propositions for an appropriate social welfare model, "Social welfare needs to be interpreted broadly, and 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."

This necessitates a reconsideration of both the theory and practice of the dominant psycho-social, pathological and rehabilitative approach to social work. We need to assess whether the intrapsychic casework method of solving problems should be dominant, or whether we should pursue collective solutions to problems, in direct consultation with those affected.

The radical approach needs to permeate the daily work of social workers on the ground in order to be effective. Social workers need to be radical in their approach as opposed to reformist. They have to critically analyse the reality of their working system and then plan appropriate intervention strategies that promote the redistribution of power and resources according to the rights of the consumers of welfare.

They need to ensure that knowledge is shared and that critical discussion takes place in the communities in which they work. They have to play the roles of enabler, facilitator and advocate, with the view to empowering the communities. Through the strategy of empowerment, people are encouraged to take charge of issues that affect their social well-being. Social workers must not only make people and communities 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. They should encourage communities to come up with their own solutions and to take collective action on this basis. Social workers also need to network with all helping professional and indigenous workers in the communities, so as to share creative ideas and ensure the development of a mutually consistent approach.

The Need for Organisational Unity

I believe that the radical approach outlined above is a constructive and viable alternative to the residual welfare model. However, radical transformation will only take place if all the key players are prepared to work at change consistently and relentlessly. Much is expected of social workers as agents of change in their places of work. In addition, social workers have to align themselves and join forces with social worker organisations, as well as other professional and community social service groups whose common goal is social justice.

Radical social work highlights many issues of concern in the South African social welfare system. A pertinent issue is that of the lack of unity amongst social worker organisations. This is obviously a reflection of life in broader society, but we need to move forward. Social workers have to acknowledge their differences and make progress towards establishing a national forum or association of social workers in South Africa. Many painful, but hopeful, days lie ahead in our move towards unity, democracy and social justice.

Ann Ntebe is an assistant lecturer in the School of Social Work at UCT. She is also the chairperson of the Social Workers' Forum in CapeTown.