

# **Social Development and Urban Poverty**

**Proceedings of a Workshop  
Held at the Kentucky Hotel,  
Harare, Zimbabwe**

**22 – 26 February, 1993**

**School of Social Work,  
Zimbabwe**

# **Social Development and Urban Poverty**

**Paper presentations and edited proceedings of a  
Workshop held in Harare, Zimbabwe  
22nd – 26th February, 1993**

**edited by Nigel Hall**

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## **Aims and Focus of Workshop**

### **Workshop on Social Development and Urban Poverty**

**Dates:** February 22 – 26, 1993

**Venue:** Kentucky Airport Hotel, Harare, Zimbabwe

**Contact:** Editor, Journal of Social Development in Africa, School of Social Work, P Bag 66022, Kopje, Zimbabwe, Tel: 750815.

**Sponsors:** Overseas Development Administration (British Development Division Central Africa)

**Organisers:** Journal of Social Development in Africa, School of Social Work

**Participants:** To be drawn from Southern African countries: Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Also participants from University College, Swansea.

#### **Aims of the Workshop:**

- a) To discuss issues of social development with specific reference to urban poverty.
- b) To facilitate an exchange of experiences on problems of poverty in southern Africa.
- c) To examine the social consequences of structural adjustment programmes, especially as they relate to urban poverty.
- d) To discuss the implications of urban poverty for social work education and practice, in particular, fieldwork.

#### **Focus of the Workshop:**

- The Workshop will focus on the problem of urban poverty, looking at issues such as definition of problems, intervention strategies, social policy, the way forward, analysis of students' experiences while on fieldwork, etc.
- Country structural adjustment and economic reform programmes will be reviewed.
- The Workshop will also address the issue of popular participation and accountability, with the objective of making central and local governments more accountable than they are.
- Specific services such as housing, health, community services, personal social services, social security, research, etc, will be evaluated in their relation to urban poverty.
- Fieldwork, with its implications for social work education and practice, will be examined.

#### **Papers will be two-pronged:**

- a) Focus on country with discussion of urban poverty, extent of problem, intervention strategies, etc.
- b) Focus on fieldwork regarding its role in training social workers and urban development; and social development training with special reference to fieldwork.

## “Looking for an Appropriate Method for Engaging the Underclass”

S J G Clarke \*

### Introduction

I hope that I may be allowed to express a little dissent at the outset. In his opening remarks to this Workshop, Mr Mukwewa, the Acting Head of the Department of Social Welfare, called for the development of an indigenous model of social work. I fully understand the sentiments behind this suggestion, but I am afraid that I must demur. We are finding in the North that the consequences of urban poverty are causing social stress and the dislocation of the lives of a great number of our people. This is not a new phenomenon but it is one for which we have not yet found an appropriate model for social work intervention. Social work has been forced onto the defensive and into the sidelines of an area where it should show competence and leadership. We are not claiming that social work can resolve the ill-effects of structural adjustment, but that we have failed to address these problems at all.

I have come to Zimbabwe to learn from your experience. I hope also to contribute to your analysis of the social issues with which we contend. I believe that we will find that we have many experiences in common and I hope that we can co-operate in producing a model for social work that will help us all to tackle our common problems with more skill and effect. This is why I do not believe that we should be seeking indigenous models of social work.

The extent and nature of urban poverty in some of the developed economies has given rise to many conflicting analyses of its causes and consequences. Some approaches to the issue have been based more on political and ideological premises than on scientific research. Because of this, the subject has begun to enter the national mythology in the UK and also in the United States.

One category of urban poor has given rise to special scrutiny. This category is now being referred to as the *underclass*. One of my hypotheses in this paper is that such a class may already exist in your societies as well as in ours and I hope to be able to suggest a developmental approach to tackle it. I hope also that we will find that we can develop a common model with which to engage the problems that emerge.

### Structural Adjustment in the North

We have had Structural Adjustment (ESAP) for a long time in the North. We have never had it spelled out to us in the same terms as it has been for the developing economies of Africa, etc. However, the political and economic consequences are there for all to see and experience.

In 1976, for example, the government of Harold Wilson was forced to accept severe restrictions in public spending by the International Monetary Fund as a condition of bailing out the British economy. From that point on, the restructuring of the British economy was officially underway – a process that was to cross Party lines and set to continue until the present day. The government was also forced to abandon the long-held ideological position of all political parties, that the goal of government was to create the conditions for full employment (Therborn, 1986). The process has intensified since 1979 when the restructuring of the economy became a central plank of the Conservative government’s economic policy.

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One of the consequences of this, in our developed economy, was a switch from industrial manufacturing economic concerns, to purely financial criteria for judging the success of the government's policy. The control of the money supply and of inflation became the crucial issue.

The social consequences of these policies were anticipated: the weakening of organised labour, the creation of a work-hungry population and the lowering of real wages which were supposed to create the conditions of the new economic prosperity. The consequences were a fragmentation of society, particularly at the lower income levels and recession for the whole economy. There were tragic and serious civic consequences of that process and they were deliberately ignored for the whole of the duration of the government of Margaret Thatcher. Now, when we find that unemployment has risen again to three million, these consequences are being viewed with alarm by the people in power. The tragedy is that they do not appear to have any idea how to tackle it.

When you consider a country like the UK, with a consolidation of social wealth and a comprehensive network of social services, it should just be a matter of policy adjustment to ensure that no-one in society falls through the safety net. The British Welfare State has been adapted over the years to respond to just such situations. But the working of structural adjustment and the failure of the social services in practice, has led to considerable numbers of people falling through our welfare safety net completely. It is this group whom, it is claimed, are forming a new class and they are the subject of this paper (Murray, 1990; Field, 1989; Halsey, 1992). These are the real crisis casualties of structural adjustment.

### **The Underclass**

What distinguishes this group from other social casualties in the past, is that, apart from the numbers involved, many are falling into a pattern of permanent detachment from the regulated community. It is this detached group that we now call the *underclass*. This class is now forming underneath the generally accepted pattern of class formation. It is characterised by new forms of residential formation, new social relations and new economic and survival mechanisms. Though this is taking place in and around the original community and economy, it is detached or semi-detached.

The process has been well documented in the USA, but now the discussion has moved across the Atlantic to our community. Is there an *underclass* in the UK? Who might they be and how should we respond? One of the difficulties in answering these questions is that this group is very difficult to identify.

There appears to be a class of people who are not listed, nor registered on any records of the State. They are not registered for social security or welfare programmes. They are not looking for work. Apparently they are out of work and they are not looking for work! This is an intriguing situation. The reason for this may be because they are homeless and rootless. They may look for economic survival through alternative and possibly criminal means. They may live, and have been brought up, in a second or third generation pattern of family life which bears no resemblance whatsoever to the established pattern of family formation in the community at large. We are vague about these questions because, as stated, we do not really have the mechanisms to test our theory.

One of the difficulties which we face when studying these social phenomena, is that there is a great deal of political mileage to be made from their exposure. In a society riven with popular prejudice about 'scroungers on welfare benefits', drug abusers, and racial/ethnic friction (or fears about friction), those with a working knowledge of the causative factors may back off making their views public. This is because those with the working knowledge often have a responsibility to protect the image and frail survival systems that their clients may have established. Stigmas and populist political reactions to the 'facts' make a bad situation worse.

The formation of this class is already seen by political commentators in the USA and the UK, as exploitative of the parent society, parasitic, and definitely threatening to the social conventions and the status quo. The big issue for social work must be: "Did we see it coming?"

Since the '70s, we have been made forcefully aware of the re-emergence of the poverty which was one of the evils that the post-Second World War welfare state had set out to banish forever. From the beginning of this re-discovery, we have seen the development of a culture of poverty and it is from this culture that the new *underclass* has sprung.

What needs to be brought out in this Workshop, is whether such groups and classes exist in the greatly expanded urban areas in Zimbabwe or Zambia or Mozambique, etc. This is essentially an **urban** problem and that is why it is important to address it at this Workshop. Do there exist, in the urbanised centres of southern and east Africa, groups of people who have severed their links with the mainstream economy or who have non-conforming pattern of family life? Do such groups exist *within*, but not *of*, the greater community? Many would like to say they do not exist here. You may well claim that you have a well-formed social network and support systems; that you have extended families, ethnic associations and the like. We might have claimed the same for ourselves – and then we discovered that the situation had changed without our noticing.

### **Vulnerable Groups**

One of the most significant factors to have emerged over the past ten years, which is a direct consequence of ESAP, is that for the second time we have witnessed the unemployment figure rise to over three million (Kaletsky, 1993). That is three million bread-winners, which represents eight or nine million family members from a community of 57 million, who do not have regular income above a notional poverty line or from gainful employment. Certain subgroups, notably from ethnic minorities, have unemployment rates double, or more, than the national and local average (Dept of Employment, 1992).

It is true that we have a system of state benefits which offers a minimum level of financial support to many families in this situation, but this level of support is very low. In the UK, we begin our definition of poverty at this income level. Despite the benefit system, many of these people fall through the net and become part of this other subsistence, survival economy (social security). This is the social framework that arises when a government takes on the financial constraints of the IMF/World Bank as a national policy.

Britain is not so slavishly dedicated to the unrestrained workings of the 'free market' as the USA. Nevertheless, when our government takes radical steps to restructure the social and economic base of the society, it has to take firm policy to ensure that it will succeed. Some of the steps it has taken to enforce social conformity have been to coerce certain categories of people into line. Others have found themselves excluded from the state benefits system altogether and thus from a minimum economic existence. For example, let us consider anyone under eighteen years of age. This age group have to live at home (except under exceptional circumstances), find work or join a government training scheme if they wish to claim state benefits of any kind.

Unfortunately, many young people under the age of eighteen are forced to leave home for one reason or another and sometimes they might be thrown out of home by their parents. Homeless people have great difficulty finding stable employment and they have to have a permanent address to be eligible for any state benefits or to join a place on a training scheme. So where do they go?

You do not have to be under eighteen to feel the weight of the government pressure to get out of the benefits regime. We now have over a million adults who have been out of work for more than one year. The cost of maintaining these unemployed is crippling the government's structural

adjustment programmes. Although there are few vacancies anywhere, this group is put under great bureaucratic pressure to find work. The government recognises that there are these structural problems, as Mr Lamont, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, has said that unemployment is the price we have to pay if we wish to bring down inflation (inflation is the primary target for our structural adjustment programme) (cited: Kaletsky, 1993). For some of the unemployed, the pressure to 'conform' is too great and they drop out of the system. Where do they go?

A third vulnerable group, on the edge of conformity but often living in desperately straightened circumstances, is single parents. Moynihan (1968) drew attention to the difficulties faced by this group. Today, in 1993, we are into the third generation of children born and raised in these isolated and extreme conditions. What role models does this group draw upon and what allegiance does its members hold to society?

As a nation, we can see the effects of structural adjustment: high unemployment, reduced state revenues from tax, low morale in the labour force and static national productivity. Financial interests seem to be satisfied, but the entrepreneurial class itself is confused by the social outcome. The fate of the poor and unemployed is unremitting pressure and social stigma.

At what point does social work take an interest in this process? Few social workers are economists (although, one is now our Minister of Health – including responsibility for Social Services), but they all have to deal with the product of structural adjustment. The unemployed, the homeless and the poor are their clientele. Our difficulty is that we do not have an appropriate methodology to deal with the pressures on our clients. Under normal circumstances, our training and agency policies offer us a framework within which to work, but the discovery of a new stratum in the community whose behaviour constitutes a resistance to our system, leaves most social workers deskilled.

One of the questions that we must discuss at this Workshop is whether there are groups of people in your communities who have detached themselves from the mainstream community and are living in a state of resistance to it? If there is such a group, what impact does it have on your work and how do you engage it? If you are not sure, are there any steps that you should be taking to help you discover what is happening? We have a phenomenon called 'street kids' in the UK and USA (Huston & Lilliard, 1989) – perhaps you may have heard of it?

Some social workers, and their agencies, have tried to engage the problem. For most, however, the pressure of routine work and the limitations of conventional practice finds the most marginalised and resistant groups neglected or ignored. *Workfare*, make-work schemes, some local economic initiatives and crisis groupwork have been tried intermittently, but no changes in policy have emerged. Meanwhile, the problem remains unfocused and the community at large becomes uneasy.

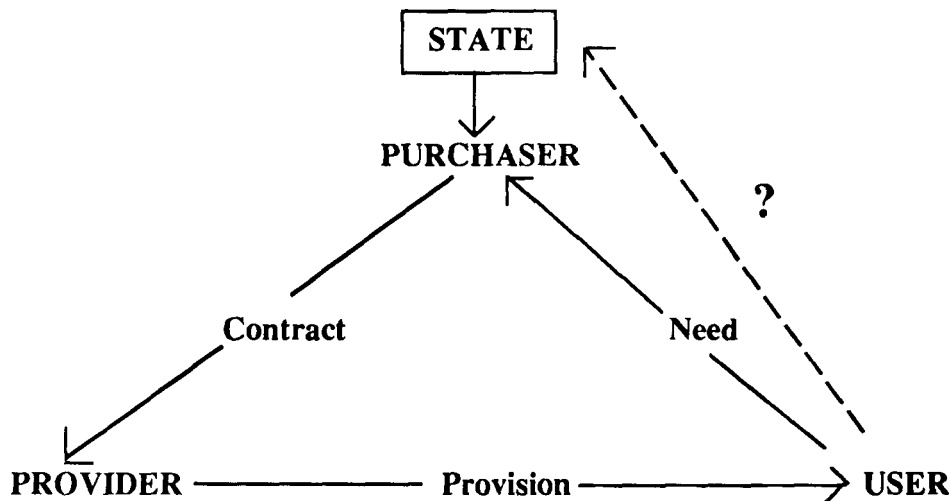
## **Community Care**

The latest twist in the structural adjustment policy is due to be introduced in the UK in April, 1993. It is an ingenious scheme which has been launched with the consent and approval of most of the social care organisations: State and NGO. As the date of inception approaches, the social care agencies are beginning to discover that there are considerable differences between the motive of the government and their own eagerness to institute the new system. The new system is called *Community Care*.

The government's fight against inflation has centred on establishing control over, and bringing about the reduction of, public spending. This led immediately to the charge that the government was destroying the Welfare State – to which the British have become attached over the eighty-plus years of its development. The public reaction forced the government to devise an approach which would deflect the main criticism from itself but still allow it to pursue its policies. *Community Care is one such mechanism.*



Through the control of the scale of public expenditure, the government restricts the overall limits on spending on social services. The new structure requires that the local authorities, themselves, withdraw from the direct provision of services. Instead they must purchase services in a notional 'market place' – a 'mixed economy of welfare', where the private sector, NGO sector and semi-government agencies compete for the right to provide services on a contract basis. Thus the relationship between the user of the service and the purchaser of the service is mediated through the provider agency.



Now you can see from the above diagram that the relationship between the user and the government is decidedly unclear. The government has produced a collection of **Charters** which outline the quality targets for the providers and the purchasers (who are responsible for the proper spending of local taxes). This makes the providers responsible; but they are not in control of the level of resources needed to do the job. Thus, social work in the UK is going to become part of a market mechanism. Most qualified people are not going to provide services – they are going to buy them as employees of the Local Authority. They will buy them from whatever source and at the best price. If those services fail, the consumer is going to blame the provider or the purchaser, but not the government. The government has created a buffer between itself and the users of social services. It has produced a confusing relationship that is going to deflect a lot of pressure from itself while it gets on with structural adjustment. The 'problem' of getting a quality service has become a purely local issue.

The main function of local authority social workers will be the assessment of local need. Once they have done that, the level of affordable service will be set against the scale of needs. Anyone whose needs assessment brings them within the scope of affordable services, will get services. The remainder, with lower priority needs, will get nothing from the state sector.

### A New Role With Old Skills?

Because of these changes, the role of social workers is going to change dramatically and there will be a marked downgrading of the 'caring' component. New models of intervention will be needed to cover this aspect of social care. There has been great uncertainty in the field and at least one piece of research points to the problem that professionals are seeking the security of what they know best NOW, rather than to determine what they will need to know in the future. They are seeking to become counsellors and therapists rather than managers. One outcome of this is that they have not yet looked

at one of the most problematic areas – what to do with those categories of need which fall outside of the priority areas? If we have to look to the informal sector, the private sector and the NGOs for the residual services that this category of need requires, how will the profession keep in touch?

The situation of social workers, particularly in an urban setting, is that they are going to have to absorb new skills at a time when there is likely to be considerable disruption to services for those in need. Consequently, still more will fall through the welfare net and the scale of the *underclass* will increase.

One of the main obstacles to the development of British social workers' competence in the field of the *underclass* is their lack of awareness of the skills, values and insight that comes with the community development model. British social work programmes do not commonly teach the subject. At Swansea University, we have the only specialist programme available that is recognised by the Central Council for Social Work Training. The reason for this regrettable omission from the training repertoire goes back to the 1960s and '70s. A serious ideological rift emerged at that time which resulted in the full qualifying programmes in community development withdrawing from the social work field. The skills and approaches available to community development workers may be the only mechanism available to intervene in communities that have detached themselves, in whole or in part, from the mainstream society. These are people who do not respond to the services and normal processes of welfare intervention. They demonstrate that they do not want to take part by actively detaching themselves.

The essential requirement for social work intervention is that people want to participate or they can be induced or coerced to join in. The *underclass* are not joiners, they are **unclubbable** to the extent that they resist the wider society (Morse, 1965). They are not regulatable by the established norms of society. They do not necessarily even respond to the offer of resources. They live outside the networks which social work has learned to penetrate.

Ultimately, social work intervention depends on a consensus model of society. When we talk about participation and empowerment, we are talking about the forging of active consensus (Oakley, 1991). It is very difficult to sell a non-consensus model of community development to British students or British social workers in the field. The idea conflicts with career projections, ideas about professionalism and their idea of society. Consensus is the essential underlying value of social work training and practice. It is interesting to note that, in the USA, social work training includes the model of community organising which involves a conflict model. In Swansea, this is only taught to a minority of community development specialists.

The problem is this: How does a social worker create stable formations within **unclubbable** groups in society – amongst offenders; amongst the detached young parents living alone with no parenting model to look to, and no form of stability or social identity; amongst people who have been out of work so long that they are no longer looking for work; amongst people living in cardboard boxes on the streets of London? How can you ask them to join co-operatives or even self-help groups? They certainly are not going to respond to therapy and many of them are not eligible for 'caring' services.

Our contention is that social work needs to re-adopt community development as a matter of urgency if it is to attempt to meet the special needs of this **unclubbable** group – the *underclass*. In turn, community development workers need to revive some of the older skills and practices that, more recently, have been set aside by professionals who have been drawn increasingly into the social planning mode. Increasing 'professionalism' and 'objectivity' has led to incorporation. There is now a considerable distance between the majority of career workers and the social reality of those for whom they seek solutions. Workers have found that they can have more influence over policies and change within the system if they become social planners. They have become used to talking to the people in power, whose main concern is seeking policies for the **clubbable** and not the defranchised. By doing this, the workers can detach themselves from potential conflicts, from ideology and from emotional involvement with the extreme fringe of society.

## Case Studies

Some of the problems that we face as professionals, we bring upon ourselves. We hope to be able to throw some light on two of them and to show how these themes can be applied to the issues that arise in the area of urban poverty. The first of these is the problem of tackling professional risk in the face of potential political backlash.

This example dates back a few years but its significance only became apparent through some current research (Clarke, forthcoming). The issue concerns a community of working class people in the UK who were faced with the rundown of houses and amenities in their district. Over a number of years, they faced the spread of urban blight – the emptying of houses, vandalism, Council policies that cut off funds to repair facilities and the gradual out-migration of the more able members of the community. The Local Authority was set to demolish the whole area and rebuild the houses and many of the residents believed that they would not only lose their houses – many of which were owner-occupied – but also lose their community and its traditions as well.

The process that followed was pretty conventional community development with a confrontational approach. The residents organised, with professional assistance. They created for themselves an alternative representational system that challenged the elected Councillors, the Council's plans and the authority of the Regional Administration over its procedures. Over a ten-year period, this community raised emotions and caused disruption to political processes. It halted some of the planning process and it demanded, and got, consultation over the remainder. The true significance of this activity was that it brought better governance to the town as a whole. Senior officials and Councillors are now the first to admit that they learned about being responsive to the real needs of their constituents and now this same town involves itself in detailed consultation and resident participative mechanisms.

The main lesson for everyone was that an angry community was an active and healthy community. The interests of governance can only be served if the community are engaged in the process. Detached and marginalised citizens make for bad government and bad solutions to social issues.

The second issue is closely linked to the new policies of Community Care. It relates specifically to the **residual** category of need for which there will be few, or no, services. We have already had experience of previous effects of 'Community Care' when many of the long-stay mental hospitals were closed a decade ago. Many of the ex-inmates were housed in Bed-&-Breakfast establishments which cast their lodgers out onto the streets during daylight hours. These wretched people, their sense of reality often suspended on a cocktail of drug therapy, had to spend their lives wandering around with no services, nor professionals, to tend to their needs.

At this time, the social work profession did not find this group of social outcasts needy enough to put them in a priority category. They did not know how to deal with the issue, anyway. In Derbyshire a few years ago, a small number of people, who suffered from mental illness, got together and formed themselves into an organisation. They objected to the level of services that they received and they objected to the definition of 'illness' which the medical profession employed as a mechanism of control and for rationing treatment. Their organisation developed, through advocacy activities, into a consumer-managed advice and resource centre. It now employs its own workers (professionals) and also controls the work of a number of social services workers (Clarke & Hawker, 1992). This organisation now acts as the hub of a Federation of consumer-run organisations which provide the only services for many sufferers of mental illness in the County. They also play an increasing role in shaping the policies of the Health and Local Authorities as their command of their own 'subject' cannot be denied.

There are other groups in our society in a similar situation – notably those people with severe physical disability. These groups, under 'Community Care', are usually ignored unless they are presented as crisis cases.

In Derbyshire (again) and in Hampshire, two groups of people with severe physical disability, have done exactly the same thing. They are people who do not command many services as their need is seen as low priority. They now run their own advocacy and advice services and they, as tax-payers, have demanded grants to pay for them. They are now part of a national 'Independent Living' network. This is demanding that the state provide the proper level of resources to allow physically disabled people to live normal lives in the community, under their own system of care. The services they decide they need, they will pay for and they will employ the necessary staff to meet their needs in the way they want them to be met. They have now become a forceful political lobby in the country and have completely changed the image of people with physical disability. One of their most strident demands was to free themselves from the control of social workers!

In the new regime, within which social workers will become the managers of systems of care and budget holders, the consumer-directed service may become the only mechanism through which those with residual needs can receive support and get their message across to the framers of policy. Professionals are going to have to rely heavily on their being successful. Social workers should come to terms with the idea that they should not only be promoting the cause of these new formations, but should be taking the necessary steps to develop them as free-standing organisations.

Social workers are the only resources **employed** to intervene at community level. Much will depend on how they see the boundaries of their new role after 'Community Care'. If they confine their interventions within the 'statutory' boundaries of care for the most needy, then those in the residual categories will have to develop their own support resources without social work support. They will be in competition with Community Care.

If any of these groups get organised without the cooperation of social workers, there will be resistance if social workers attempt to exploit their work. This will, quite rightly, be rejected. Social workers must begin at once to reduce the gap between themselves and society at large. In addition, they must re-discover the skills of community development so that it can assist those outside the priority need categories to make reasonable demands on society. Failure to engage these people, in extreme cases, will mean that they may fall through the boundaries of the established community and swell the ranks of the *underclass*.

Contact with those who have already fallen through will require more resourcefulness and more humility. Social workers must find the will to share the experience of those who find themselves outside the mainstream community. If they are to convince anyone that it may be worth coming back, it will be through the *underclass* organising to come back on its own terms. There will be risks at all levels of intervention. Those that manage social workers must be prepared to support them while they take those risks in the interest of better governance and better service to those in need.

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