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

Urban Poverty and Fieldwork

Social Development Training with Special Reference to Fieldwork (includes Panel Presentations)

Group Discussions, Conclusions and Appendices

Aims and Focus of Workshop

Workshop on Social Development and Urban Poverty

Dates: February 22 – 26, 1993

Venue: Kentucky Airport Hotel, Harare, Zimbabwe

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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.

"Urban Poverty and Implications for Social Work Training and Practice: the Malawi Scene"

E Kalemba *

Introduction

This paper assesses the role that social work can play in social development and in particular in mitigating the effects of poverty in urban areas. The paper supports the thesis that while the philosophy of social work is relevant to solving problems, its methods and training of social workers need to be made more relevant to the Third World to make an effective contribution to solving the problem of poverty. The paper therefore sees a new role for social work in the context of social development which in turn has wide-ranging implications on its methodology. Using Malawi as an example it acknowledges that this process has already begun but needs to be pursued further.

Urbanisation and Urban Poverty: The Policy Framework

Until recently both government and donor policies did not regard the urban community as a priority problem area. Firstly this was because the urban population is still significantly smaller than the rural population, which is 15% and 85% of the total population respectively. Secondly the quality of life of urban dwellers as measured by such indicators as infant and child mortality, nutrition status, household income, and access to basic services of health, water and sanitation, and education was comparatively better than that of rural areas. This thinking is beginning to change because the incidence of poverty even among urban dwellers has become more transparent in recent years as the effects of structural adjustment programmes are felt (World Bank, 1990). The emergence of such urban problems as the proliferation of squatter settlements which are unplanned and lack basic services, as a result of rural to urban migration; epidemics which usually afflict these low-income groups; begging; street children, prostitution, crime, the growth of the informal sector and the black market as survival mechanisms of the poor are a manifestation of poverty and people's response to it. In addition the rate of urbanisation of 5-15 % per annum is higher than ever before. It is estimated that at the present rate of growth of 2,000 per week, Malawi's urban population will be 30% of the total population by the end of the decade. Some attention, therefore, has begun to be drawn to the urban problem (CSR:1992). This narrow definition of urbanisation, however, does not include urbanisation as a social process, which needs to be taken into account.

The Extent of Urban Poverty

Any discussion of the poverty situation is marred by the definitional problems. The concept is understood to have different meanings by different groups depending on their motives. It is a value-laden concept which eludes objective definitions of the problem. For the purposes of this paper, therefore, poverty is defined as a condition characterised by deprivation of basic needs in terms of food, water, health shelter, education; and a lack of means and opportunities to fulfil these basic needs. The poor are those who are unable to meet minimum nutritional requirements and essential non-food requirements and equivalent to US$40 per capita per annum (World Bank, 1990). This is an indicator of general poverty, since lack of access to food is associated with inadequate satisfaction

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of other basic needs. There is no agreement, however, as regards what constitutes essential non-food requirements; these differ from group to group, and society to society, and from time to time.

The poverty situation is influenced by many factors which include lack of, or low, income, or poor employment opportunities, low education and limited access to educational opportunities, poor health and nutritional status. All these are exacerbated by rapid population growth rates and low economic productive capacity. These factors produce poverty and are in turn produced by poverty.

Trends in the 1990s indicate that the urban scenario is fast changing. Some important observations have been made in a preliminary baseline survey undertaken by the Centre for Social Research of low-income households in Blantyre and Lilongwe. The survey included households with incomes below K500 per month, but specifically targeted households with an income of K200 or less per month (CSR, 1992).

The main findings indicate that Malawi's urbanisation has accelerated rapidly since independence in 1964, even though it is comparatively low when compared with neighbouring countries. This heightened shift from rural to urban areas, in addition to the rate of natural growth of the population brings in its wake a number of problems that exacerbate poverty. More than 80% of urban residents in Lilongwe and Blantyre live in non-permanent traditional housing areas, or squatter areas, and at least 65% of the urban population can be classified as poor, with 20-25% as the "core poor" (defined by the World Bank as those not achieving minimum nutrition requirement equivalent to US$40 per capita per annum).

Some of the characteristics of the urban population indicate that 51% are males, 48% are female, and 46% were under 15 years. Generally speaking, this population tends to be young, the average age within the households surveyed was 19 years. 5,3% were female-headed households, which is in sharp contrast to 30% in rural areas. The urban poor are mostly found in the informal sector, amongst the unemployed and low-wage earners. Along with large low-income households and the new migrants from rural areas, female-headed households are highly represented amongst the poorest urban groups. 7,2% of household heads and 24% of the spouses had received no education at all. 68% of primary school-age children attended school, while the rest did not.

The poor and unskilled in urban areas do not have a markedly higher income and are not any better off than their counterparts in rural areas. Earnings of urban poor dwellers are derived primarily from formal sector employment, in skilled work, in the service sector, and from casual labour. This source of income is on the decline as the absorptive capacity of the formal sector, contracts and wages become stagnant. Informal sector activities, therefore, are beginning to play a crucial role in the lives of the urban poor, to fill in the income gap and as a survival mechanism. Of the households surveyed in the CSR study, 41% were involved in small businesses, eg petty trading, tailoring, beer brewing, car repairs, vending, tinsmithing etc. For these small business activities, credit is obtained through informal channels, friends, relatives, money lenders, savings groups and associations. Other sources of income for poor urban dwellers include rents, remittances, and for a few, pensions. Household monthly income was estimated at K136,48 while monthly expenditures were K158,74 (K126,20 in 1989). Incomes, therefore, were inadequate to meet household expenditures given the rising costs of living. A large share of the expenditure, 65%, was on food alone, leaving very little for other household expenses and services such as education, health, transport, and almost nothing for savings.

Another observation of the urban poor, is the high level of malnutrition prevalent among the under-fives. 59% of under-fives measured and weighed were found to be stunted. In spite of the disproportionate amount spent on food, households have to lower food quality and cut down on meals to make ends meet, thus impacting on the nutritional status of the family. This situation also reflects periodic household food shortages and prevalence of disease, caused by low incomes and living conditions.

The high demand for housing, severe housing shortages, inadequate plans for housing facilities in urban areas, have resulted in a deterioration of the living conditions of the urban poor. Squatting has escalated dramatically, and a large squatter population is emerging. It is estimated that at least half of Malawi's urban dwellers live in the so-called "Traditional Housing Areas" and squatter areas, which are the points of fastest growth in the urban areas. The squatter areas have very limited services and amenities in terms of housing, clean water and sanitation, education, health, and roads. The closest services are to be found in the established traditional housing areas, but these services are already over-stretched.

The conditions of the urban poor are grim and are likely to become more severe in future as population continues to spiral upwards. This poses a serious challenge to the social work profession in the country.

The Crisis of Social Work in Developing Countries: Tackling the Poverty Issue

The relevance of social work practice to solving problems in developing countries has been questioned by many writers (Midgley, 1978; Lockhead, 1969; Khinduka, 1971, and several others). Briefly stated, the application of western models of social work practice and training to the Third World is judged as irrelevant and inappropriate, because, it is argued, the conditions in the two worlds are different (Midgley, 1983; Williams, 1976), with the exception of a few urban areas. Therefore, rather than spend a lot of time and resources on meeting the needs of a minority, social work should concern itself with wider social problems that afflict the majority of people in Third World countries. This view needs to be critically evaluated in light of the situation described above. This is more so, when the philosophy of social work is taken into account, which is that social welfare is there to mitigate the effects of social problems in certain individuals and groups. These problems occur in any society, developed and developing, as has been shown above, *albeit* in different proportions. It would seem logical on the basis of this argument that social work is as equally relevant to developing countries as it is to the West. What makes social work ineffective, in the developing world, however, is its approach and some of its methods, which are pre-occupied with individuals and therefore cannot reach the majority of people who require its services, and it does not tackle the root causes of these problems, but only the effects in most cases. There are, however, ways in which social work can actually help to tackle wider social development issues in the developing world, especially in the urban situation, and these are discussed below. It requires a serious redefinition of the function of social work in the Third World from what it is now to a more activist and developmental orientation. This implies changes in the way in which social work is organised, its role in society and in the training of social workers.

Implications for Social Work Practice in Relation to Social Development

If social work practice is to make a positive contribution towards reducing the incidence of urban poverty outlined above, this requires tackling not only the effects of the problem but its root causes, or in other words moving into the arena of social development. This can be achieved through some of the following strategies:

- ***Involvement of Social Workers in the Formulation of Development Policies***

The new role of social welfare demands that the profession make a contribution in the formulation and execution of national development and economic policies. This is necessary because many of the social problems are the result of these policies (eg World Bank, 1988:88).

Being the profession that usually comes first into contact with persons suffering from effects of

these policies, social workers are in a vantage position to feed this information back into the system, thus helping prevent future problems. The preventive role is one that many writers have placed emphasis on for social work in the developing world (Midgley, 1983). This means that a typical social welfare department should be able to monitor and analyse change, more than just helping clients. It also means that social workers must be trained to be able to fulfil this role in addition to their traditional training. Subjects such as Development Policies, Economics, Quantitative Methods, and Social Sector Planning and Management, become useful. In addition, the public image of the profession must be enhanced so as to gain respect and acceptance by other professions.

The implications on the content of training of social workers and on the structures and institutions that would make this a reality in any society or country are discussed further below.

- ***Micro-Level Role of Social Work***

Beyond psychotherapy and other forms of treatment, social welfare should move into the developmental arena. This is already happening in some cases, where instead of merely giving out handouts to individuals or groups, social workers organise activities that empower the people to help themselves, through, for example, skills training, vocational rehabilitation, small cooperatives and community-based programmes such as day care for preschool children. Such approaches have the effect of tackling the root causes of problems while helping to resolve symptoms. The two must exist side by side for effect change to occur. These models are an innovative departure from the Western models of social welfare and social work.

The solutions to some problems demand fresh approaches, as Malawi has experienced in dealing with beggars, where the policy of counselling and repatriation to home village for resettlement has failed to make even a dent on the country's begging problem. An innovative approach is required, emphasising the strengths of the beggars or other clients rather than their negative sides, and assisting them to realise their full potential. As others say we should "think ability, not disability".

This however is merely a matter of emphasis, because, obviously, certain clients will continue to need the traditional social work services which can best be provided through casework and similar methods.

Implications for Social Work Training and Fieldwork

- ***Training Curriculum and Methods***

Long-term changes in social work in the developing countries will be achieved mainly through a change in training curricula and methodologies. Subjects not traditionally considered of a social work nature will need to be introduced. (Hall, 1990:18). These would be culturally relevant and appropriate to the conditions of Third World. Subjects covering issues concerning the existing social institutions that provide social security, mutual aid groups, community self-help traditions and values, and political systems all need to be integrated into the social work training curriculum to make social work developmentally appropriate and effective. Some attempt is made in Malawi to do this in in the training of social workers at a basic level. A student who is not prepared in this way will be in difficulties in the field as he discovers the limitations of his profession. Often the demands on social workers are more than they can satisfy. They are often asked for material help when usually all they can provide is therapy and counselling. The problems for which casework and counselling is required are often the result of, or related to, material deprivation, in the first place. It is important, therefore, that a social worker should be trained to suggest solutions to both problems on an individual or group basis, and not merely be able to do one without the other.

From the list of problems mentioned above it is clear that the present training of social workers does not prepare them adequately to work with poor urban communities, and some of the institutions that cater for them. The curriculum will have to be broadened in order for the social worker to understand more fully the problems he will encounter.

- ***Fieldwork Placements***

Training in social work, especially in the new order, is incomplete if it does not provide an adequate opportunity for field experience. Most problems that social workers deal with or encounter, require an experienced and mature approach because they are often depressing, shocking or even disgusting. This experience and maturity can only be achieved through properly planned and executed field placements. The purposes of field placements have been well-defined and fully discussed elsewhere (Hall, 1990; Young, 1967). Here it will be helpful to discuss some of the difficulties that are encountered in a country like Malawi. The basic courses for social workers now last a year and a half, and are designed to prepare the student to work in a variety of situations, ie, as a generic social worker in a district office; specialist in an institution such as a Home for juvenile delinquents, or in an agency offering social services of different types. The curricula covers traditional social work fields and methods, with heavy emphasis on social casework. It also covers subjects such as Social Legislation, Social Theory, Psychology, Public Administration and Accounting. Field placements were for a period of three months when the course was of one year duration, but will now be six months duration, usually of the block variety, with the option of moving students from agency to agency. Use is made of both government and non-governmental organisations.

The demands for social development training and orientation mean that the students should be exposed to as many different situations as possible, since the problems they will encounter are diverse and complex.

Unfortunately many agencies have focused programmes which may not permit this, thus are a disadvantage to the student. In addition, in terms of urban programmes, few organisations have them, although they are based in urban centres. The result is that the student tends to do office work most of the time because the real work is done in the rural areas and travel is tied to expenses and therefore not frequently done. Another pertinent problem is the attitude of the field supervisors and the senior officers in the agencies who have a tendency to regard students as additional manpower and therefore use them to clear their work backlog or to do menial work. Proper orientation of the field supervisors is required if the students are to benefit from their placements.

Student supervisors also tend to be unqualified, even if they have the enthusiasm, and may therefore be unable to properly supervise and guide the student. Cultural considerations should also be taken into account in field placements. Issues such as gender and age play an important role in Malawian culture and have been known to impinge on student/supervisor relationships. All these factors affect the quality of field placement the students have.

As far as the problem of urban poverty is concerned, the new focus on this area should create more opportunities for urban programmes in which social workers can fully participate during training, and as practitioners. Some of these are already in existence, such as pre-school education programmes, programmes for street children and beggars, the rehabilitation and care of mentally retarded children of Cheshire Homes, and new urban child survival and development programmes in the cities, which offer new opportunities for social workers. In fact local authorities have recognised the importance of social work interventions and have begun to create social welfare departments (eg Lilongwe City Council) and hiring qualified social workers. The urban community with its diverse cultures, heterogeneous groups, and lack of coherent communities should certainly prove to be a challenge for the social work profession in future.

Conclusion

The present social and economic climate which is characterised by a society in transition from a subsistence economy to one that depends on industrialisation demands that social work indigenise to meet fully the various needs of people in this phase. In many ways this process has already begun and is undergoing constant redefinition and refinement. There is need for developing countries to evolve their own forms and types of social work in order to address the particular problems in these countries. This has implications on the methods of training future social workers to assume these new roles.

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