

Implications of Developmental Social Welfare for Occupational Social Work

Dr Adrian D. Van Breda

Senior lecturer, University of Johannesburg
adrian@vanbreda.org

Paper presented at the ASASWEI Annual Conference 2007,
University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa
3-4 September 2007

The goal of social development is the synchronisation of economic and social development. Within this framework, much attention is given to poverty alleviation and job creation, which are seen as crucial for the holistic development of a nation. This perspective appears to exclude the field of occupational social work, which, by definition, works with people who are already employed.

There has, in response to this, been considerable debate among occupational social workers regarding the relevance of developmental social welfare for occupational social work. Much occupational social work, and particularly social work within Employee Assistance Programmes, is not well aligned with the principles of the developmental social welfare approach as articulated in the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997).

This paper endeavours to articulate what a developmentally-oriented occupational social work practice could look like. Six main implications of developmental social welfare for occupational social work are explicated, viz (1) working across the micro-meso-macro continuum, (2) increasing participation in decision making, (3) empowering vulnerable groups, (4) promoting economic development among the working population, (5) generating meaningful work, and (6) mobilising a conducive working milieu.

Introduction

The promulgation of the White Paper for Social Welfare in 1997 (RSA) brought together and formalized a change in the approach to social welfare. In essence, the welfare model changed from a residual or institutional approach, to a developmental welfare approach. This is intended as no mere window dressing, but rather a fundamental shift in orientation to the needs and challenges of South African society. As such, this shift has significant implications for all fields of social work practice, including occupational social work.

Unfortunately, these implications have not been explored by occupational social workers. Indeed, there is not a single publication on the relationship between the developmental social welfare approach and the field of occupational social work. There appear to be two main responses to occupational social workers to developmental social welfare. Firstly, there are those who see no relationship between developmental social welfare and occupational social work. They regard the two domains as so discordant, that there is no fit between them at all. On the other hand, there are those who perceive an easy and natural fit between the two. They do not perceive any dissonance or competing paradigms, and argue that occupational social work has always been developmental.

It is my contention that both of these views are inadequate. The first is unduly pessimistic and fatalistic, while the latter is naive. In my view, occupational social work does *not* fit easily within developmental social welfare. Indeed, occupational social work is at risk of becoming redundant – one of the white elephants discarded along the social welfare road. Nevertheless, with a little effort, occupational social work could become a vital and important role player within the broader developmental field.

The purpose of this paper is to unpack the implications of developmental social welfare for occupational social work. I begin with a brief overview of social development and developmental social welfare, to highlight the challenge for occupational social work. Then I will outline six ways in which occupational work can become more developmental in its approach to practice.

Social Development

'Social development' entails linking economic and human development. Midgely (1995, p. 26) argues that social and economic development are interdependent, that is, that one cannot become socially developed without being economically developed, and that one cannot become economically developed without being socially developed. Social development has, as its goal, the development of the people of a nation. The vehicle for this development is economic empowerment. Midgely (1997, p. 15) states:

The developmental perspective in social welfare [ie social development] seeks to promote the well-being of people through harmonizing economic and social policies within a dynamic process of development. It uses a comprehensive macro-perspective that focuses on communities and societies; emphasizes planned intervention; promotes a dynamic, change-oriented process that is inclusive and universalistic; and above all seeks to enhance people's welfare by integrating the economic and social dimensions of development.

Social development is an alternative approach to social security, replacing the traditional institutional and residual approaches adopted in many countries (Bernstein, 1995; Lombard, 1998). Instead of providing comprehensive care to the whole society or of providing social security to those who fall through the net, social development aims to enable people in need to generate an income that will enable them to be self-sufficient contributors to the national economy rather than dependent on the state. Social development aims to demonstrate that the development of people also has a positive benefit to the economy (Midgely, 1997).

In addition, social development aims to ensure that the economy serves the needs of the people. The notion of distorted development is important here. Distorted development occurs when the national economy grows, but the development of most people remains the same - typically because a minority are becoming increasingly wealthy while the majority remain poor. Social development monitors economic progress to ensure that it is in the best interests of the entire nation (Ngan & Hui, 1996). Thus, at a macro level, social development ensures that human development is incorporated into the drive for economic growth, a goal that is consonant with social work values.

The challenge for occupational social work is that our clients are, by definition, employed. It would seem, therefore, that we have little place within social development. Of course, we know that having a job, earning an income, does not inevitably result in social well-being or healthy social functioning. Nevertheless, if social development were the dominant paradigm, we would have difficulty defending our right to exist. Fortunately, developmental social welfare, and not social development, is the official approach to social welfare in South Africa.

Developmental Social Welfare

Developmental social welfare is the model adopted by the White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997). This document adopts a broad approach to human development. The goal of developmental social welfare is (RSA, 1997, p. 7):

a humane, peaceful, just and caring society which will uphold welfare rights, facilitate the meeting of basic human needs, release people's creative energies, help them achieve their aspirations, build human capacity and self-reliance, and participate fully in all spheres of social, economic and political life.

The White Paper (RSA, 1997, p. 93) defines developmental social welfare as "the vision, mission, goals, principles and agenda for action set out in Chapter 2" of the Paper. These sections of the White Paper paint a broad picture of developmental social welfare. While the White Paper unambiguously highlights economic poverty as a priority area for intervention, this is certainly not the only area of human life identified for development.

Developmental social welfare, as described in the White Paper (RSA, 1997), is characterised by:

- ❖ Promotion of human capacity and self-reliance.
- ❖ Fostering of a caring, enabling and conducive socio-economic environment.
- ❖ Promotion of the social functioning and well-being of individuals, families and communities.
- ❖ A balance of rehabilitative, preventive, developmental and protective services and facilities.
- ❖ Securing of basic welfare rights or social security for all.
- ❖ Promotion of the participation of all people in democratic decision-making.
- ❖ Improvement of quality of life for all, but especially those who are disadvantaged, are vulnerable or have special needs.
- ❖ Promotion of policies and systems that are people-centred and fair/just.
- ❖ Socioeconomic development of people, that is, investment in human capital.
- ❖ Programmes that are financially viable, cost effective and efficient.
- ❖ Intersectoral partnerships and collaboration between organizations, between professions, between state and civil bodies, and between government departments.
- ❖ Accessibility and appropriateness of service rendering.
- ❖ Mutual support or *ubuntu*.
- ❖ The eradication of poverty, inequality, injustice, discrimination, intolerance, disrespect, cultural insensitivity, corruption in welfare systems and the infringement of human rights.

The United Nations has described developmental social welfare as follows (cited in Estes, 1997):

Developmental social welfare focuses on the maximization of human potential and on fostering self-reliance and participation in decision-making, and stresses the organization of family-oriented, community-based and integrated services. Social welfare programmes assist individuals and groups at various stages and in different circumstances of life to develop their capacities and to become or remain productive members of society, in addition to supporting those in need of care, protection and financial help.

Although the terms 'social development' and 'developmental social welfare' are often used interchangeably (eg. Gray, 1996, p. 9), it should be clear that they are not synonyms. While social development aims to improve people's lives through economic development, developmental social welfare has a much broader range of interventions (including education, housing, social work, primary health care, etc).

The developmental social welfare of the White Paper is a broad and holistic approach to meeting the multifaceted and fundamental needs of all people in our society. In terms of meeting the needs of people who are economically poor, a *social development* approach is used rather than a residual or institutional approach, thus replacing the existing system of state grants. In terms of people who are poor in other ways (Max-Neef, 1991), a *developmental approach* (as described in the first two paragraphs of the preamble of the White Paper) is used.

Implications for Occupational Social Work

On the face of it, it seems that occupational social work has little in common with developmental social welfare and particularly social development. The truth of it is that the practice of occupational social work is frequently not aligned with the principles, values and goals of developmental social welfare. Our work is often dominated by micro level therapeutic interventions. We often concentrate on individual symptomatology without considering the social systems that create and maintain such symptoms, particularly the workplace system that we have direct access to. We are often more interested in working with management than with workers, as the prestige is with management. Sometimes we even collude with the capitalist greed of management at the cost of the workforce.

So the challenge for us is to think critically about the implications of developmental social welfare for occupational social work practice. I wish here to outline six ways in which occupational social work can become better aligned with developmental social welfare, viz (1) working across the micro-meso-macro continuum, (2) increasing participation in decision making, (3) empowering vulnerable groups, (4) promoting economic development among the working population, (5) generating meaningful work, and (6) mobilising a conducive working milieu. In each case, I will make a general statement of the implication and then list several simple implications for practice.

1. Working Across the Micro-Messo-Macro Continuum. Many occupational social workers are employed as employee assistance practitioners or in employee wellness services. In these capacities, services may be focused largely on individual therapy. Many occupational social workers are not involved in preventive, developmental or group based interventions, policy formulation, work structuring, organisational development, etc. Occupational social workers who wish to integrate their work into a developmental social welfare approach need to overturn the dominance of case work in the workplace.

This is not to say that therapeutic or individual work has no place in developmental social welfare. A social work intervention deserves the label 'developmental' when it is characterised by certain features, rather than when it is macro or preventive (McKendrick, 1998; Rankin, 1997; Starke, 1996). Indeed, most community work interventions address a community *problem* and are therefore therapeutic, albeit at a meso or macro level. There does, however, need to be a balance between therapy and development, and between micro, meso and macro interventions.

In an endeavour to promote this balance among their own social workers, the Social Work Directorate of the South African National Defence Force has identified the following four sets of activities that need to be practised in balance (Kruger & Van Breda, 2001):

- ❖ **Restorative Interventions.** These interventions, which can be applied micro, meso or macro levels, address problems which employees (or their families) experience in the personal, non-work dimension of their lives. While individual therapy is practised, social workers are encouraged to deal with problems at the most macro level possible.
- ❖ **Promotive Interventions.** These interventions, which can also be applied through all methods of social work, address needs which employees (or their families) experience in the personal, non-work dimension of their lives. While restorative interventions focus on problem resolution, promotive interventions focus on enhancing the quality of life, need fulfilment and prevention.
- ❖ **Work-person Interventions.** These interventions focus on people's relationship to the workplace, assisting them to fit better with the organizational needs. These interventions seek to enable employees and their families to thrive in the workplace and to become resilient to organizational stressors.
- ❖ **Workplace Interventions.** These interventions focus on the organisation's relationship to the people, assisting the organisation to fit better with the needs of the workforce. These interventions seek to create a healthy working milieu that is conducive both to the healthy social functioning of employees and their families, and to productivity, efficiency and performance.

2. Increasing Participation in Decision-Making. Occupational social workers who wish to be aligned with the developmental social welfare approach will need to adopt a more participative, democratic, person-centred approach to social work in the workplace. When working in an occupational setting it is often tempting to become 'specialised' in order to be seen as credible and professional. While there is surely nothing intrinsically wrong with this, it can result in an attitude of superiority, aloofness and distance. These characteristics are clearly contradicted by a developmental, participative approach.

The occupational social work literature has made sporadic references to the use of community development (or locality development) processes and principles in the workplace (Cole, 1988; Packard, 1992). Adopting such an approach to social work in the workplace will undoubtedly bring occupational social work into closer alignment with developmental social welfare principles. This would entail seeing the workplace as a community, and facilitating a long-term, bottom-up process of human development that is guided by the needs and concerns of the community.

To increase participation, occupational social workers could (adapted from Rothman, 1978):

- ❖ Avoid an expert approach, and rather function as an 'enabler-catalyst' or 'encourager'.
- ❖ Work with felt needs as defined by the work community.
- ❖ Adopt adult education principles and practices.
- ❖ Utilize action or task groups in the workplace.
- ❖ Utilize volunteers, peer counsellors and peer educators in the workplace.

- ❖ Facilitate discussions between people that help them resolve their own difficulties.
- ❖ Promote consensus, consultation, cooperation and inclusion so that maximum participation is ensured.

3. Empowering Vulnerable Groups. The White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997), the Reconstruction and Development Plan (African National Congress, 1994) and the developmental social welfare literature all emphasise the priority of so-called vulnerable groups. These include people who are women, people who are young, people with disabilities, people living in rural areas and people who have become old. Many of these groups are represented in the workplace, particularly when occupational social workers are also responsible to provide services to retired employees and the children and spouses of employees.

It is sometimes tempting to provide services to those who are senior in a workplace – these are the people who have influence and leverage, these are the people who are sufficiently intelligent to benefit from psychotherapy. It may also be tempting to spend a great deal of time with managers, as this increases our sense of professionalism and expertise, which boosts our self-esteem.

However, alignment with developmental social welfare requires us to pay particular attention to those client groups who are vulnerable. This means working with female employees, junior employees, blue-collar employees, spouses and children of employees and those who are disabled.

Programmes should address the following:

- ❖ The acquisition of life skills.
- ❖ Empowerment, self-esteem and confidence building.
- ❖ Equal opportunities in the workplace.
- ❖ Issues that primarily affect women, such as sexual harassment and discrimination, sexism, lack of equal opportunities, childcare and other maternity issues, etc.
- ❖ Cultural, racial and ethnic diversity and sensitivity in the workplace.
- ❖ Challenging of organisational policies, practices or cultures that result in the marginalisation and exclusion of any demographic group.

4. Promoting Economic Development among the Working Population. While employees in the workplace earn a salary, it is fallacious to think that this empowers them economically. Employees in the formal sector where we work earn reasonably good salaries, yet large numbers of them, across the salary levels, experience financial difficulties. For all people, but particularly for younger workers who have not had the privilege of spare cash in their formative years, managing a salary responsibly is a daunting challenge.

In social development, those who co-create self-employment opportunities with people who are poor typically also provide extensive training and capacity building. The message is clear: merely receiving an income does not result in human development; additional input is required. The same is true in the occupational setting. Additional training in self-management is essential for human development.

In particular, training programmes should assist employees and their families in:

- ❖ Managing their finances.
- ❖ Budgeting and investing.
- ❖ The use of credit facilities.
- ❖ The relative advantages and disadvantages of loans.
- ❖ The mechanisms for escaping from a spiral of debt.

Occupational social workers should also explore the possibility of persuading their employers to take responsibility to facilitate job creation and economic development programmes with the families of employees, particularly those who are economically disadvantaged.

5. Generating Meaningful Work. Human development requires more than having a job, developing socially and managing our finances effectively; it also requires us to be engaged in work that is meaningful. In previous generations, work was intrinsically meaningful – it was an essential part of family life, a forum for socialisation and closely linked with religion and

spirituality. Marxist theory has helped us recognise that work in capitalist, industrialised society has become fragmented and as a result meaningless. Human beings need to have a sense that they are contributing to something greater, rather than merely repeating a task on a production line.

Occupational social work can play a vital role in facilitating the development of the meaning of work for employees. In this way, the value of work, which is a cornerstone of human development, can be optimized.

Programmes should be formulated which:

- ❖ Promote a communitarian work ethic.
- ❖ Highlight the value of work in the life of humans.
- ❖ Emphasise the link between work satisfaction and life satisfaction, between the meaning of work and the meaning of life.
- ❖ Develop personal vision, purpose and mission in the work setting.
- ❖ Help employees understand how their particular job contributes the organization's mission.
- ❖ Help employees understand how the organization with whom they work contributes to the well-being of society.

6. Mobilising a Conducive Working Milieu. A significant goal of developmental social welfare is to create a societal milieu that is conducive for human involvement. During a dialogue on developmental social welfare in 1998, David Gil used the analogy of gardening. He said that in order to produce good crops, you need to ensure that the soil is fertile and well cared for; similarly, in order to produce 'good people', you need to ensure that their social environment is enriched and well cared for. At the same meeting, Dr Kotze of UWC suggested that developmental social welfare is a body of activities that enables people to cope with changing conditions and that promotes the development of human and material resources to deal with the consequences of change.

Extrapolating from these ideas, one may suggest that occupational social work should ensure a conducive working environment. This environment should be conducive to productivity, well-being, personal development and growth, and psychosocial health. This requires more than a programme that seeks to assist employees in dealing with their personal (and individual) problems. Rather, this requires the social worker to intervene with the organization itself, what we call the "organisation as client" (Googins & Davidson, 1993).

In the same way that merely alleviating poverty maintains the status quo of the social systems that created the poverty in the first place, addressing employees' problems solely at a personal or family level maintains the status quo of a dysfunctional work system that initially created (or contributed to) the problem. It is, I believe, this point that occupational social workers who seek to be aligned with developmental social welfare need to debate most urgently.

Developmental social welfare, in contrast with earlier approaches to social welfare in this country, requires a de-emphasis on remedial, therapeutic and individualistic interventions, and a greater emphasis on interventions that are preventive, developmental and communalistic. Previously, societal problems were suppressed (and oppressed) by stamping out the symptoms. Developmental social welfare requires us to address the fundamental or underlying problems and perhaps even to allow symptoms to fester so as to generate energy for change. In this way, developmental social welfare has much in common with social action.

In the workplace, then, when individuals manifest symptoms, rather than only treating them therapeutically (individually or even in groups), the developmentally oriented occupational social worker seeks to analyse the underlying ecosystemic network of the symptom and then to address the system itself, and not merely the individual symptom. The occupational social worker is not satisfied with happy employees; s/he also wants a well-functioning, just, egalitarian and evolving work system.

CONCLUSION

Occupational social work should be a vital force within the profession of social work and within the domain of developmental social welfare. Too often, however, we fall into older, remedial models of practice, that focus on individuals, that ignore larger systems, that neglect or even abuse vulnerable people, and that advance the needs of the few over the many. All of these are out of synch with developmental social welfare.

What is required of us is to ensure that the principles and practice of occupational social work contributes, within our domain of the workplace, to the national vision of "a humane, peaceful, just and caring society which will uphold welfare rights, facilitate the meeting of basic human needs, release people's creative energies, help them achieve their aspirations, build human capacity and self-reliance, and participate fully in all spheres of social, economic and political life" (RSA, 1997, p. 7).

Reference List

- African National Congress. (1994). *The reconstruction and development plan: A policy framework*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Umanyano Publications.
- Bernstein, A. J. (1995). Redefining social work's emphasis on the 'social': The path to development. *International Social Work, 38*(1), 53-67.
- Cole, D. W. (1988). Evaluating organizations through an Employee Assistance Program using an organization development model. *Employee Assistance Quarterly, 3*(3), 107-118.
- Estes, R. J. (1997). Social work, social development and community welfare centers in international perspective. *International Social Work, 40*(1), 43-55.
- Googins, B., & Davidson, B. N. (1993). The organization as client: Broadening the concept of Employee Assistance Programs. *Social Work, 38*(4), 477-484.
- Gray, M. (1996). The role of social workers in developmental social welfare: Is there a place for them? *Social Work Practice, 96*(2), 8-13.
- Kruger, A., & Van Breda, A. D. (2001). Military social work in the South African National Defence Force. *Military Medicine, 166*(11), 947-951.
- Lombard, A. (1998). *Transforming social work education in South Africa: A contextual and empowerment issues*. Paper presented at the Joint Universities Forum.
- Max-Neef, M. (1991). *Human scale development: Conception, application and further reflections*. London, UK: Apex Press.
- McKendrick, B. (1998). Social work education and training: From preparing for apartheid society to training for a developing democracy. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk, 34*(1), 99-111.
- Midgley, J. (1995). *Social development: The developmental perspective in social welfare*. London, UK: Sage.
- Midgley, J. (1997). Social work and international social development: Promoting a developmental perspective in the profession. In M. Hokenstad & J. Midgley (Eds.), *Issues in international social work*. Washington, DC: NASW.
- Ngan, R., & Hui, S. (1996). Economic and social development in Hong Kong and southern China: Implications for social work. *International Social Work, 39*(1), 83-95.
- Packard, T. (1992). Organization development technologies in community development: A case study. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 19*(2), 3-15.
- Rankin, P. (1997). Developmental social welfare: Challenges facing South Africa. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk, 33*(2), 184-192.
- Rothman, J. (1978). *Fostering participation and promoting innovation: Handbook for human service professionals*. Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock Publishers.
- RSA. (1997). *White paper for social welfare* (Government Gazette, Vol. 386, No. 18166, 8 August). Pretoria, South Africa: Government Printer.
- Starke, H. (1996). The role of social work in developmental social welfare. *Social Work Practice, 96*(2), 25-28.