Still many challenges to overcome to make social welfare fully viable

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TWENTY years ago South Africa embarked on a bold strategy to renew its welfare system as part of a larger project to transform society to achieve peace and social justice and overcome the social divisions of the past.

Significant policy and legislative achievements have been made and a rights-based approach to social welfare has been promoted. But the implementation of social development policies has not been seamless. Issues include the widespread belief that grant beneficiaries abuse the money, that social grants encourage teenage pregnancies and dependency on the state.

Although there is no evidence that social assistance, or social grants, have these unintended effects, these views pose a threat. They could lead to a backlash against the programme among politicians, taxpayers and the public.

The White Paper for Social Welfare set out a policy framework, proposals and recommendations for implementation. But confusion remained about the theory underlying the approach. There was a lack of clarity about definitions and the application of the approach. This was believed to be a major factor in the slow progress that was made in implementation.

Different interpretations exist, such as that individual therapeutic interventions and statutory child protection services were to be replaced with community development and with income generation programmes.

Social workers felt ill equipped to implement the new approach. Some saw it as marginalising the social work profession. This was historically the primary profession in the welfare field. Resistance was therefore evident.

Large-scale transformation of a country's welfare system requires substantial change management interventions. These help professionals and service providers make strategic shifts. This didn't happen in a systematic way.

There has also been inadequate monitoring and evaluation of social development policies. A lack of agreed indicators to measure and track changes over time do not exist.

And without leaders able to champion the transformation, momentum was lost in the implementation of developmental welfare services.

In the latter part of the 1990s the government adopted the Growth Employment and Redistribution policy. It signalled a retreat from the basic needs approach of the earlier Reconstruction and Development Programme. Although this did not result in a significant lowering of social spending, the government was concerned with reducing its debt burden.

Later, as economic growth and the state's capacity to raise taxes improved, increased resources were directed to the social sector. Political support also increased, resulting in the expansion of social grants.

But the expansion of social assistance at the time had a negative impact on education and health services. The trade-off between growing one social development programme at the expense of other important programmes was highlighted by both the government and groups in the social sector.

While national Treasury tried to balance these trade-offs, welfare services continued to be crowded out as social assistance expanded. Although there have been some increases in recent years to address the imbalance, welfare services and community development programmes remain neglected. They continue to lack funding and social policy innovation.

Social welfare services are delivered as a concurrent function by provincial governments. The ability of provinces to redirect welfare funds to other services and priorities means that developmental welfare services continue to be underfunded.

A lack of capacity in provincial governments to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate service delivery outcomes also hampered service delivery.

Power struggles between government officials and non-profit organisation (NPO) partners also held back the potential benefits that might have been realised by the partnership model.

In addition, services delivered by nonprofit organisations reached a limited number of people and were not extended to rural and under-serviced areas. Many nonprofit organisations are concentrated in urban areas.

A lack of institutional capacity, including loss of staff by nonprofit organisations to the government, inadequate numbers of social workers, community development workers, child and youth care workers and paraprofessionals has been a serious impediment.

But increasing the number of practitioners to implement a social treatment approach to social work and service delivery will not have the desired outcome. Greater attention needs to be given to appropriate training of students and existing personnel in developmental welfare.

There is also need for a culture of research and innovation in the welfare field. A lack of resources to support innovation, together with a lack of transformation leaders to champion social development, are other barriers.

Corruption is widely reported at different levels in government. In the welfare field this is significant in the administration of the social grants system.

The government has implemented various interventions to increase efficiency, particularly in the administration of social grants. But welfare and development agencies and practitioners continue to face numerous challenges in service delivery and how to best facilitate participatory development.

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Social grants have reduced poverty in South Africa but the social welfare remains under economic and other pressures.