The Emperor’s new clothes: South Africa’s attempted transition to developmental social welfare and social work

Hölscher D. The Emperor’s new clothes: South Africa’s attempted transition to developmental social welfare and social work

This article critically interrogates the depth and quality of change of post-apartheid welfare policy and social work practice towards a social development paradigm against the background of inequality and poverty in South Africa. It asks several questions: what kind of welfare system has the current welfare dispensation created? How far has it moved from a residual, ameliorative system to an institutional developmental system, in keeping with the developmental welfare paradigm? To what extent can residual provisions be transformed into developmental processes? What conditions are necessary for this to happen? The answers to questions such as these provide the basis for assessing South Africa’s new developmental processes. The article highlights the fundamental contradictions in social development policy imperatives, which call for a marriage of economic and social considerations, and the internal contradictions across and within various welfare policies. Further, it argues that the government does not have the political will to bear the costs of the substantive change that the move towards developmental social work requires, choosing instead limited, individually targeted and ameliorative measures, such as increased social security spending. Thus, it suggests that ideological critique, consciousness raising and participation in public policy debates remain crucial for those who seek long-term solutions to inequality and poverty in South Africa.

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Key words: South Africa, social development, developmental social welfare, developmental social work, anti-poverty strategies

Introduction

Throughout the course of history, societies have developed mechanisms and policies to assist those who are disadvantaged, vulnerable and/or poor. The underlying motivation has always been that the human need for survival implies a necessity to sustain a basic functionality of human collectives. Thus, humans have always tried to put some system in place to take care of – or else define out of the ambit of collective responsibility – at least the most basic needs of those who are living on society’s margins (compare Gil, 1992). The nature and scale of these mechanisms have always depended inter alia on prevailing ideologies and commonsense assumptions regarding social and economic justice; individual and collective needs, rights and responsibilities; as well as derived explanations regarding the causes of, and therefore anticipated solutions to, psychosocial and economic hardship (compare Ife, 1995, 1997). In modern societies, these mechanisms have been institutionalised to varying degrees in the form of policies, legislation, state bureaucracies and civil society organs. In this regard, Wilensky and Lebeaux (1965) in their seminal publication, Industrial Society and Social Welfare, defined two basic types of welfare systems: residual and institutional. These have been used and developed further by subsequent writers on social policy and public welfare provision. Midgley (1995: 25) proposed the concept of social development ‘as an extension of the residual-institutional dichotomy’. Attempts to fit the South African welfare system into one or more of these categories has merit because of their respective
ideological connotations and implications for the way in which the economy and its concomitant welfare system should be managed in practice. If these two are not in sync with one another, it is likely that economic rationality will crowd out social issues and concerns, and with the increasing dominance of the economic over all other forms of rationality, a trend that Ife (1997) observed on a global scale, social policy would increasingly be perceived as good policy only in so far as it makes economic sense. Indeed, incongruity between social and economic policy objectives and between the welfare paradigm and practice could be seen as indicative of deeper conflicts resulting from society’s internal ‘contradictions . . . between certain social ideals . . . required for the legitimation of the system and the social practices necessary for the continuation of the system’ (Leonard, 1997: 140). Unresolved, such conflicts would likely play themselves out in day-by-day professional practice in that social workers would be expected to work in accordance with policy objectives in a context where the likelihood of their meeting such objectives would be difficult, if not impossible.

In the following discussion, the three basic conceptions of social welfare referred to above, and as used in this context, are defined. A brief outline of how the social development paradigm has been introduced into the South African welfare system, and its conceptualisation of social work, is then provided. Thereafter, the social policy environment as it has developed over the past decade or so is outlined. It is suggested that despite South Africa’s overt commitment to social development, residual conceptions of social welfare remain entrenched with post-apartheid social policy. Three crucial pillars of the project of reorienting social welfare and social work towards social development are critiqued, i.e. the transitional Department of Welfare’s Anti-Poverty Programme, the Financing Policy for Developmental Social Welfare Services, and the South African social security system. Of the three, only the latter can claim to have had a broad-based impact on poverty, yet it is the one that has been questioned most in relation to the social development framework. While some claim that it is not financially sustainable, clearly there is a constitutional imperative that provides for the social security system’s continued expansion. Having touched on voices of dissent within South African welfare policy and social development discourse, the author ends by reaffirming the need for social work to harness its critical structural outlook and to participate in policy advocacy and debate.

Developmental social welfare and social work

According to Wilensky and Lebeaux (1965: 139), a residual welfare system is based on the premise that the family and the market are the two ‘natural’ channels for meeting the needs of people: ‘The social welfare structure . . . is conceived as . . . attending primarily to emergency functions, and is expected to withdraw when the regular social structure – the family and the economic system – is again working properly’. Dolgoff, Feldstein and Stelnik (1993: 110) added that ‘the residual concept in social welfare leads to the kind of programmes in which eligibility is based on proving a need, that is, proving the breakdown of the other normative system that should be working’. The idea that professional social work services ‘come in and “pick up the pieces” in any area of need’ is a concept that is ‘closely related to the concept of residuality [–] what other institutions do not do . . . is the job of welfare to do’ (Wilensky & Lebeaux, 1965: 144, brackets added). By way of contrast, an institutional system of social welfare defined as:

the organised system of social services and institutions designed to aid individuals and groups to attain satisfying standards of life and health. It aims at personal and social relationships which permit individuals the fullest development of their capacity and the promotion of their wellbeing in harmony with the needs of the community (Wilensky & Lebeaux, 1965: 139).

To this end, social welfare, and with it, social work practice, are ascribed a ‘normal’, or ‘normalising’ function, and are seen ‘as regularised, permanent, necessary, and a desirable part of the social structure’ (Dolgoff et al., 1993: 110). Both the residual and the institutional view of social welfare, and the provision of social work services within it, are individually oriented and presume the existence of some social problem that should, once identified, be resolved, reduced or at least ameliorated. It is here that the social development paradigm in social welfare differs in certain crucial respects. While still an institutional formulation, it was conceptualised originally in the early 20th century in the former British colonies and was targeted at communities rather than individuals (Midgley, 1995) so as to develop resources and build capacity while at the same time facilitating the meeting of socioeconomic needs, and thereby preventing rural–urban migration. The hope was that the myriad of problems that had come to be associated with 19th-century industrialisation and urbanisation in Europe, and which had given rise to the establishment of the social work profession in the first place (Clarke, 1993), should be prevented from emerging or, at least, from deteriorating (Midgley, 1995). Thus Midgley (1995: 25) defined social development as ‘a process of planned social change designed to promote the wellbeing of the population’s whole in conjunction with a dynamic process of economic development’. Gray (2006: S53)
described it as ‘a theory and approach to social welfare that posits a macro-policy framework for poverty alleviation that combines social and economic goals’. The social development paradigm appealed to the post-apartheid Department of Welfare and many social workers who ‘set about addressing the disparities inherited from the previous racially divided system’ (Gray, 2006: S54).

To quantify the implications of the envisaged shift, it merits noting that in South Africa just over 10,000 social workers are employed to serve a population of well over 40 million people, ‘approximately 40% of [whom] . . . are living in poverty – with the poorest 15% in desperate struggle to survive’ (Landman et al., 2003: 4). South Africa’s Gini coefficient was at 0.635 in 2001, and its Human Development Index stood at 0.67 in 2003 (UNDP, 2004). Unemployment currently stands at about 36 per cent (Hazelhurst, 2007), with about 1.5 million members of South Africa’s workforce earning well below the poverty line (Statistics South Africa, cited in Moama, 2006). In addition, Cassiem, Perry, Sadan and Streak (2000) found that between 60 and 72 per cent of children aged 0 to 5 years and 0 to 6 years, respectively, could be considered poor. Lastly, rural households headed by African females were, statistically, among the poorest in the country (May, 1998). In other words, the adoption of social development as the guiding framework for post-apartheid social welfare and social work practice brought notions of poverty and underdevelopment into the centre of concern. It required social work practice, specialised and often located on the margins of residential institutions, to fulfil a shift from a focus on individuals and pathology towards the provision of integrated, generalist, preventive and community-based and community development-oriented services (Gray, 1996; Patel & Triegaardt, 2005).

**South Africa’s competing economic and welfare ideologies**

The broader policy context of South Africa’s attempted transition to developmental social welfare and social work is characterised by competing ideologies (Gray, 2006). In its pre-election manifesto, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (African National Congress, 1994), the African National Congress (ANC) committed itself to a social-democratic welfare ideology (Gray, 2006). This commitment was, through an elaborate consultative process, developed further and culminated in the publication of the White Paper for Social Welfare (Department of Welfare, 1997), a policy that has since served as a baseline document for all subsequent welfare policy initiatives. It was here that social development was adopted explicitly as the guiding framework for the transformation of South Africa’s welfare system. The anticipation was that this would enable the Department to respond, among other things, to the socioeconomic needs of all South Africans, especially the previously disenfranchised and poor (Department of Welfare, 1997). Parallel to this process, the South African government settled on its macro-economic policy framework, which was published in 1996 and dubbed the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy, referred to as GEAR (Ministry of Finance, 1996). This strategy was adopted at least in part because of the government’s assessment that within the existing global, economic and geopolitical constellations there were few alternatives to a conservative, supply-side oriented economic policy, especially in emerging markets. With GEAR and subsequent economic policy initiatives, such as the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA Task Force, 2006), South Africa officially embraced neoliberalism as its core economic ideology. Neoliberalism is understood here to mean a global, ideological, economic and political phenomenon that has been unfolding over the past 30 years. Constituting both a discourse and set of practices, the term refers to a dramatic shift in societal power balances in favour of corporate capital, which has been exerting pressure on governments to implement policies that seemed to favour capital accumulation strategies. (For a more extensive discussion of the concept within the South African context, see Adelzadeh, 1996; Bond, 2004, 2005; Sewpaul & Hölscher, 2004; Terreblanche, 2002.)

Based on the aforementioned argument that where social and economic policy is out of sync the economic tends to crowd out social – welfare – goals and concerns, it is suggested that with the adoption of GEAR, the ANC’s pre-democracy social-democratic welfare ideology was sidelined. In addition, it can be shown that the social development paradigm, evident in the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997), was already overlaid by a residual welfare agenda. For example, the preamble to the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997: 2) calls rather innocently for ‘South Africans [to be] afforded the opportunity to play an active role in promoting their own wellbeing and in contributing to the growth and development of our nation’ (emphasis added). However, the document contends slightly less innocently a few pages further on that, ‘since resources are limited, trade-offs must be made between investment in economic growth and human resources, and the investment in a social safety net, welfare expenditure will only be able to expand as higher economic growth rates are achieved’ (White Paper for Social Welfare, 1997: 5, emphasis added). Apart from the fact that the prioritisation of economic growth over the expansion of social welfare is clearly not in keeping with the social development paradigm, there is ample empirical evidence that these trade-offs have not been made by the economic...
elite. Instead, in the last decade they have increased their share in South African household incomes considerably (Roberts, 2005; Sewpaul, 2005; Terreblanche, 2002). Thereafter the White Paper (Department of Welfare, 1997: 6) claims that:

South Africa has a fairly developed social security system and a rich institutional framework of welfare services delivered by non-governmental organisations, such as voluntary welfare organisations, religious organisations, community-based organisations and informal family and community networks. These organisations have expertise, infrastructure and other resources which could play a significant role in reconstruction and development (emphasis added).

To mention informal family and community networks in the same breath as established welfare organisations, thereby insinuating that the deprived 40 per cent of South Africa’s families and communities for whose benefit social development is intended are also well endowed with expertise, infrastructure and other resources could be interpreted as somewhat mischievous, for it appears that this kind of thinking set the stage as much for empowerment and the harnessing of people’s strengths and capacities, as it did for the shifting of responsibility to deal with the fall-out from structural poverty, unemployment and inequality onto the very families and communities who were worst affected.

One of South Africa’s most recent welfare policy initiatives, the National Family Policy (Department of Social Development, 2006), while still in draft form, has already come under heavy criticism. The policy is intended to provide for support to, and strengthening of, South African families in the face of ‘the long term effects of apartheid, migrant labour, land displacement, rapid urbanisation . . . poor rural development [as well as] widespread poverty, escalating HIV infections and AIDS, rampant domestic violence and rape, growing sexual abuse of children, and increasing crime and drug trafficking’ (Sewpaul, 2005: 315). Sewpaul (2005) lamented that despite this juxtaposition of problems that are clearly structural in nature and symptoms of families unable to cope, in fact imploading and turning violently against themselves, there is a failure to appreciate the effects of the environment on individuals and families. Instead, the policy is designed to:

empower families to have resilience in dealing with challenges facing them . . . The value of self-reliance over dependency and learned helplessness must be enhanced . . . The family should restore its pride and dignity in order to reverse . . . the displacement of family responsibility. The strengthening of internal resources . . . to deal with life and its challenges needs to be promoted (Sewpaul, 2005: 318, emphasis added).

Sewpaul (2005: 316) concluded that, ‘given the discursive formations in the National Family Policy, social problems such as poverty [and] unemployment . . . are associated with moral degeneration of individuals, families and communities’ and Bisman (cited in Hochfeld, 2007: 83–84) detected in the policy a ‘self-reliance discourse [which] resonates in welfare systems across the globe [and which manifests as] . . . a diminishing belief that society has a moral obligation to assure food and housing for those without, education for all its young, and quality health care unrelated to the ability to pay’. Thus, in the National Family Policy the South African government’s commitment towards realising a developmental social welfare system is shown most glaringly to be hollow and superficial.

Within a neoliberal ideological context, a welfare discourse that holds the poor responsible for their predicament has clear benefits for South Africa’s economic elite. Once the onus is successfully placed on individuals and communities to uplift themselves, the facts that unemployment, inequality and poverty in South Africa are historically grown and that resources are unevenly distributed along the lines of race, gender and the rural–urban divide and structurally entrenched in the fabric of South African society can be easily ignored (Bond, 2004, 2005; Terreblanche, 2002). The ideological ground is now paved for a newly emerging elite and middle class to ‘legitimately’ enjoy the benefits of South Africa’s extreme inequalities, as wealth becomes increasingly accessible across the racial divide [compare Gray’s (2006) discussion of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE)]. This can now be done, symbolically, on behalf of the other blacks who continue to be downtrodden and poor. The latter will have to make do with the promise that the benefits of growth will, in time, ‘trickle down’ to everybody’s benefit.

The attempted transition to developmental social welfare and social work

Nonetheless, the Department of Welfare’s formal commitment to advance a social development agenda continues to be upheld, as evidenced further in its July 2002 name change to the ‘Department of Social Development’. Therefore, let us move on to examine some examples of the way in which the envisaged transition to developmental social welfare and social work has played itself out in practice. This undertaking is somewhat hampered by the dearth of empirical studies undertaken to date on this subject (Patel & Triegardt, 2005).

On 21 August 1997, the then Minister of Welfare, Ms Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, presided over the ‘Historic Signing of the War on Poverty Declaration’ (Fraser-Moleketi, 1997: 1). Recommitting government to the ANC’s pre-election vow to ‘redress decades of social
inequality and poverty in the country’, the Minister emphasised at the same time that ‘the war on poverty is not only a challenge for government alone, but for all sectors of society’. To give effect to the commitment, she made specific mention of the following strategies: the implementation of a coordinated anti-poverty programme; ‘a shift in programme financing [of non-government organisations] to more developmental social services with emphasis on community-based interventions and support’ (Fraser-Moleketi, 1997: 2); and social security.

Anti-poverty programmes: South Africa’s failure to make the change to developmental social work

In 1997, the Poverty Relief Fund was introduced by the National Treasury. Its purpose was to make additional funding available to projects and programmes directed at poverty relief and alleviation. Between 1997 and 2004, a total of R640 million (roughly equivalent to 67 million euros) was channelled from this fund through the then Department of Welfare (Poggenpoel & Oliver, 2005). In 1999, the then Department of Welfare published its Anti-Poverty Programme, 1999–2000 (Department of Welfare, 1999a) and its accompanying procedural documents (Department of Welfare, 1999b), thereby providing direction for goals and processes in its poverty relief strategies.

The Programme was targeted in the main at ‘people in rural areas, especially women and the 61% or so of the population that live under the poverty datum line and are vulnerable’ (Department of Welfare, 1999a: 7) and intended to ‘eradicate poverty across South Africa through the use of sustainable development approaches’ (1999a: 8). Anticipating an annual allocation of about R203 million (roughly equivalent to 21 million euros) over the period 1999–2003, the Department set itself a goal of funding ten national programmes as well as 8,000 income-generating projects per annum, of which a minimum of 70 per cent were envisaged to remain sustainable after completion of their funding by the Department.

However, from the outset, the Anti-Poverty Programme appeared riddled with problems, particularly around the coordination of the various stakeholders involved in its implementation. These ranged from national to provincial government structures, and other government departments involved in anti-poverty programmes, through coordinating non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private consultancies, and training service providers to the project members themselves. Communication seemed difficult and, possibly as the result of an apparent mismatch between strategic decision-making power and responsibility for implementation on the ground, an atmosphere of competition and distrust appeared to prevail (Hölscher, 1999). Established social work agencies, which had been involved in anti-poverty projects in 1997 and 1998, were no longer earmarked to receive moneys from the fund. Yet some of the coordinating NGOs appointed subsequent to the publication of the Programme had, in fact, been established just prior to their appointment. Moreover, there seemed to be a tension between the time required for the initiatives to become participatory, sustainable and grounded in the realities of communities and project members, on the one hand, and the speed imposed by annual budget cycles and the Department’s need to produce measurable project outputs to satisfy the South African public, on the other. Possibly as a result of the pressures to allocate as much money as quickly as possible to as many project as could be identified, beneficiaries received their funding by and large based on written applications and without having had on-site assessments performed to judge their capacity to implement and sustain their projects. Likewise, market research was not done, and infrastructure to provide much needed business and project management skills training was not in place (Hölscher, 1999).

In view of the above, it is hardly surprising that close to a decade later, anti-poverty strategies have failed to become a defining feature of the South African welfare system. For example, a study conducted by Poggenpoel and Oliver (2005) found that 82.3 per cent of service users seeking help at government welfare offices called in relation to social grants and 22.1 per cent with requests for individual assistance from social workers. Only 2.4 per cent of the study’s sample called in connection with poverty relief projects. In addition, Poggenpoel and Oliver (2005: 31) observed that ‘the Department of Social Development has been unsuccessful in spending [its allocation of the Poverty Relief Fund] appropriately – if at all. Where allocations have not been spent the [Department] has not been forthcoming with details regarding the reasons’.

This is not to say that no poverty alleviation projects have been implemented at all or that those that have been implemented have not made an impact on the lives of project members, or that poverty alleviation programmes are not welcomed by South Africans. However, on the whole, surviving anti-poverty projects, while in many cases innovative and responsive, are unlikely to have a significant impact on mass unemployment and levels of income poverty. Furthermore, many of these projects are not cost efficient in terms of their outcomes (Taylor Committee, 2002: 56).

The Financing Policy for Developmental Social Welfare Services: another failure to make the change to developmental social work

Parallel to trying to implement its anti-poverty programmes – under exclusion of established social work agencies – the then Department of Welfare published its
Financing Policy for Developmental Social Welfare Services (Department of Welfare, 1999c). The policy may be interpreted as an attempt to unite the conflicting ideologies and policy objectives from the economic and welfare spheres within one document. There were, on the one hand, the ends that the policy sought to achieve. It was an attempt to enforce alignment of mainstream social work services with the new developmental welfare paradigm (Sewpaul & Hölscher, 2004). It would have meant an overall shift from the predominant financing of statutory services and institutional care to the financing of mainly of preventative and community development interventions, and was envisaged to have been completed by the end of 2004 (Department of Welfare, 1999c). On the other hand, there were the means by which these ends were to be attained. To give effect to its intention, government planned to use its financial power as a tool, since most NGOs were dependent upon government subsidies for their survival (Sewpaul & Hölscher, 2004). Unlike the case of the specifically targeted Anti-Poverty Programmes, however, no additional funding was made available at National Treasury level to facilitate this broad-based transformation of social welfare and social work. The Department of Welfare acknowledged, therefore, that the shift had to take place ‘within a welfare budget [which] in the medium and long term will never be sufficient [sic] to address all the services that should be delivered’ (Department of Welfare, 1999: 41).

During the same period, welfare practitioners across the country were already experimenting with a range of innovative, creative, democratic and empowering models of developmental social work (Gray, 1996; Sewpaul & Hölscher, 2007). However, practitioners were uniform in their assessment that ‘sustainable programmes are not cheap! Somebody pays ... whether community volunteers, family members who take on the roles of carers, practitioners who commit themselves to making things happen, the organisation or government’ (Sewpaul & Hölscher, 2007: 205). And predictably, in view of the above, practitioners noted the absence of any ‘defined plans on the part of government to mainstream these pilot projects’ (Sewpaul & Hölscher, 2007: 206). As a result – with the contrast between planning and reality sharpened by the unfolding of the ‘orphan crisis’ as the AIDS epidemic worsens – it would appear that mainstream social work services continue, or have reverted to, individually and pathology-oriented statutory services. At the time of writing, follow-up research has not yet taken place as to how many of the developmental social welfare projects referred to above have survived, possibly expanded or instead closed during the first decade of the new millennium. Nevertheless, available qualitative evidence suggests that the rendering of developmental and preventative services depends largely on the creativity of social workers in using gaps that may open from time to time in their statutory routines (Sewpaul & Hölscher, 2007).

Social security: the success story?

A debate has been unfolding over the purpose and scope of South Africa’s social security system which comprises two complementary benefits: cash and in-kind transfers (Gray, 2006). Cash benefits are means tested and designed such that able bodied, working age adults do not qualify irrespective of their level of need. Cash benefits target income poverty among the ‘neediest’ and ‘most deserving’ sectors of society, such
as children up to the age of 14 years; the elderly above 60 and 65 years of age (for women and men, respectively); disabled persons (including persons suffering from full-blown AIDS); and children in foster care. Poggenpoel and Olivier (2005: 17) claim that these cash transfers, despite their residual nature, remain ‘the largest direct-intervention programme aimed at alleviating poverty’, reaching just under 12 million people in 2006 (Manuel, 2007), with over 7.5 million beneficiaries being recipients of Child Support Grants (Government Programme of Action, 2007). The Taylor Committee (2002) estimated that with full uptake of existing grants, social security could reduce the poverty gap by 37 per cent.

The Minister of Social Development, Dr Zola Skweyiya, commissioned the Taylor Committee (2002) to investigate the possibility of introducing a sustainable, comprehensive social security system in South Africa (Pressly, 2006). The Committee recommended a Basic Income Grant (BIG) to reduce the poverty gap and suggested greater support for poverty alleviation projects, public works programmes and inkind transfers. These findings led to the formation of a civil society coalition to lobby for the implementation of the BIG. This is the closest the post-apartheid policy debate has come to an institutional model of welfare which is quite contrary to the government’s claims vis à vis its ‘developmental welfare system’. Clearly, there is a clash of ideologies between welfare lobbyists (BIG Finance Reference Group, 2004; Skweyiya, in Pressly, 2006) and the finance ministry and economic sector. The Finance Minister and the National Treasury expressed outright opposition to the recommendations of the Taylor Committee, while economists have questioned the financial sustainability of the social security system. Joffe (in Gray, 2006: S60) described South Africa as ‘the developing world’s biggest welfare economy’ with an ‘average 30 per cent growth in social security spending’ such that South Africa’s 12 million grant recipients are supported by ‘less than seven million taxpayers, with the most affluent 20 per cent paying 94 per cent of personal income tax’ (Gray, 2006: S61). Despite his expressed support for a Basic Income Grant (Pressly, 2006), the Minister of Social Development highlighted the government’s increasing ‘concern regarding the growing demand for social assistance’ (Skweyiya, 2006: 1). Gray (2006: S61) questioned South Africa’s heavy reliance on social security as an anti-poverty strategy suggesting ‘that diverting money to social grants means diverting it away from sustainable development through education, health and job creation’. The welfare sector’s capacity problems notwithstanding, the Department of Social Development has begun exploring yet again how best to link grant payments with participation in poverty relief projects in the hope that some recipients might eventually be diverted out of the state grant system again (Skweyiya, 2006). Why is it that the only anti-poverty strategy that has been able to demonstrate expansion and success is the social security programme? Clearly, the imperative to make money available for social security – residually oriented as it were – has been greater than to make funds available for developmental services and programmes. But how does one convert or transform residual welfare measures into developmental welfare processes?

The Bill of Rights (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996), the most fundamental source of legitimation of South Africa’s post-apartheid dispensation, binds the government to progressively expand citizens’ socioeconomic rights and to meet its statutory obligations to ensure their protection against socioeconomic hardship (Savage, 1998). So in the absence of social development programmes altering the structure of South African society at any considerable rate, socioeconomic rights continue to be increasingly claimed, and progressively granted, via the social security system. And what little of the welfare slice remains each budget year for social work services, is absorbed largely through statutory intervention aimed at protecting individuals against, and ameliorating the trauma inflicted by, South Africa’s escalating levels of family violence, abuse and other more public forms of crime (Gray, 2006).

In short, one of the core contradictions that have emerged in the context of South Africa’s post-apartheid welfare dispensation is that the government has been obliged to expand the social security system while at the same time failing to address the underlying causes of income poverty and related inequality and the associated social problems. However, one could argue that social security is one of the steps towards social development and that social development is a combination of all the efforts at improving people’s quality of life and eradicating poverty at all levels, including both institutional and residual provisions.

**Discontent and dialogue**

The above social welfare policy initiatives and attempts at transforming South Africa’s welfare system and social work practice have been accompanied by a chorus of criticism, rooted in a counter discourse of social justice and solidarity. This is a discourse that can be found both within government and in civil society. Its vibrancy may well be another effect of the same contradictions that have hampered South Africa’s attempts at transforming its welfare system in line with a social development agenda. Here, the ideology of collective responsibility to overcome the legacy of colonialism and apartheid dominates. Poverty and inequality are seen as structural problems requiring structural solutions. They are seen to arise from centuries of colonial and apartheid oppression wherein indigenous populations were systematically robbed.
of their lands, their productive assets, their cultural heritage and their self-respect. The historic disinheritance of the vulnerable and poor is seen to have been exacerbated and entrenched by contemporary global political and economic conditions (Terreblanche, 2002).

While agency and the capacity for positive change and economic independence are not denied to the poor and disadvantaged, for personal efforts and community-based initiatives to succeed, poverty and inequality must be simultaneously addressed on a structural level by means of redistributive economic and welfare policies, both globally and nationally (Sewpaul, 2005, 2006). In line with the ANC’s pre-election manifesto – the Reconstruction and Development Programme (African National Congress, 1994) – the Taylor Committee (2002) referred to this as the constitutional, democratic and socioeconomic imperative facing the South African public.

Civil society – NGOs and coalitions ranging from trade unions to council of churches to issue-based social movements and lobby groups – has been vocal in calls for a structural response. Social workers have not. Some of the complex reasons accounting for the failure of social workers to develop a voice regarding macro-level policy have been discussed elsewhere (Hölscher & Sewpaul, 2006; Sewpaul & Hölscher, 2004). Suffice it to say at this point that as long as social workers receive their pay cheques either directly or indirectly from government, as the vast majority do, compliance is likely to prevail over critical engagement.

Yet, even when critical engagement with government is sought by members of civil society, the former has developed a reputation for reacting defensively more often than not. Roberts (2005: 498) claimed that ‘there has been a lack of public discussion and consultation on the appropriate policies’, suggesting that, indeed, the South African government has chosen quite consciously not to engage constructively, or to delay engagement, with social movements comprising and claiming to represent the interests of the poor. In particular, groupings labelled in official discourse as radical, such as the Abahlali baseMjondolo (shack dwellers movement), the Anti-Eviction Campaign, the Anti-Privatisation Forum, the Basic Income Grant Coalition, the Landless People’s Movement, and the Treatment Action Campaign, have been sidelined based on the perception that their demands and policy suggestions are unreasonable, unpragmatic and even destructive. This has, according to Roberts (2005: 498), led to ‘an apparent mismatch between anti-poverty policy and programmes on the one hand, and the circumstances and the needs of the poor on the other, a phenomenon that is determined, at least in part, by the lack of voice and limited active participation of the poor’.

A possible explanation for this lack of dialogue is that South Africa’s (new and old) economic and political elites continue to benefit from an economic ideology that secures wealth in the face of extreme inequality and widespread poverty, and a welfare ideology that places the onus increasingly on the poor to uplift themselves by their bootstraps. This is despite a constitutional obligation to work towards the attainment of socioeconomic rights for all and despite an official commitment to social development. However, as long as the fallout from these contradictions in the form of e.g., spiralling social security costs does not appear entirely unsustainable, the prospects for public dialogue and open debate between government and civil society will remain limited. Acceptable will be those contributions that are focused on institutional reform and on making current forms of welfare provision more efficient. Unacceptable will be those contributions that point out the structural contradictions that are continuing to fuel inequality, poverty, underdevelopment and dependency. Consistent with neoliberal systems worldwide, the question to be asked is not how might we secure more resources but how might we make better use of the resources we already have.

Conclusion

This article has critiqued available evidence in policy and practice as regards the envisaged shift of welfare and social work practice towards a social development paradigm. It takes a structural perspective and endeavours to trace some of the underlying contradictions that policy makers and welfare practitioners seem to be grappling with in light of the ‘constitutional, democratic and socioeconomic imperative’ (Taylor Committee, 2002) on which the South African government’s historical and moral legitimacy can be said to lie, and which has informed the developmental approach adopted in the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997). This, it has been argued, has been overlaid by South Africa’s commitment to a neoliberal macro-economic framework, which, among various consequences, has led to a systematically inadequate financing of innovative, replicable and large-scale developmental social work, including anti-poverty programmes, projects and strategies. The only successful and broad-based anti-poverty strategy – South Africa’s social security system – has been labelled by some as anti-developmental and/or fiscally unwise – without having even unfolded its full reach. It was contended that over-expenditure in the sphere of social security and under-support of genuinely developmental social welfare initiatives were inevitable as they represent the consequences of essentially structural contradictions between economic and social policy. Decreasing grant payments will not be possible due to South Africa’s constitutional imperative towards progressively realising socioeconomic rights. Consequently, redistribution between social security and social development as suggested by
Gray (2006) is not an option. The availability of funds for a sustainable developmental welfare system hinges on the ability of the national economy to generate sufficient funds for this purpose. Then, what exactly is required for a structural orientation in social work processes?

Contemporary neoliberal economic policy favours a residual welfare policy agenda, albeit phrased in developmental terms: the Emperor’s new clothes. By engaging in policy discourse and debate aimed at uncovering policy contradictions and structural injustice, can social workers effectively work towards eventual structural change in the fabric of South African society? Is Gray (2006: S63) correct? Has ‘the time . . . come for social workers to speak out against the injustices of structurally induced poverty and the widening gap between rich and poor’? And if they did, would this make a difference? The theory of social development eloquently advocated by Patel (2005) argues that the social and economic sectors must work together in a coordinated whole-of-government approach for a true structural solution to be found. This article, however, contends that the South African government does not have the political will to do this. What chance then for social development?

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to my colleague, Dr Betty Mubangizi, for her input in what became the basis for this article. I am also indebted to Professor Mel Gray for her facilitative style in putting this Special Edition together.

References


