Responses to poverty in post-apartheid South Africa: some reflections

Mubangizi BC. Responses to poverty in post-apartheid South Africa: some reflections

I discuss in this article the challenge of addressing people’s psychosocial needs when the causes of problems are environmental or structural. I argue that poverty can be addressed only by tackling its structural causes and removing social inequalities. In so doing, I argue that a range of antipoverty measures introduced by the government have proved ineffective, including neoliberal measures to foster economic growth, such as GEAR and ASGISA, public works programmes, social security, and poverty alleviation projects (PAPS) which, while mildly effective, were poorly administered. My strategy of choice is an ‘all hands to the pumps’ approach involving participatory community development, social action, policy change and joint partnership between civil society, the state and the private sector. I do not suggest particular approaches or solutions but highlight the role of social workers and community development workers in poverty alleviation.

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Over the last 12 years, following the first democratic elections in 1994, South Africa has experienced a dramatic shift from a totalitarian, apartheid state, to a democratic, egalitarian society. Through social work and community development there have been far-reaching attempts to transform the separate, unequal and highly discriminatory welfare services into a developmentally oriented equitable system able to respond to the structural injustices inherited from over 350 years of colonial and apartheid rule (Department of Welfare, 1997; Terreblanche, 2002). Among these injustices, poverty is particularly prominent and compounds all others, such as gender, race and regionally based inequalities.

The socially conscious government in South Africa, albeit restrained by global, political and economic realities, firmly placed the need to address poverty high on the nation’s policy agenda. A range of programmes show that the government is committed to providing a better life for all by fighting poverty in all its manifestations (Mubangizi, 2004). This commitment is regularly reiterated by top State officials, for example, on Freedom Day – 27 April 2006 – President Mbeki (2006) stated that ‘... on this historic day, as a nation, we renew our pledge to build a better life for all’. This assurance has also been reiterated in three consecutive State of the Nation addresses in 2005, 2006 and 2007 (www.info.gov.za/speeches/son) in which the President also spelt out the substantial amount of resources that have been directed to fulfil this commitment. Yet anticipated results in poverty reduction have, by and large, not been achieved. In fact, some argue that since 1994 levels of poverty and inequality have increased rather than diminished (United Nations Development Program, 2004) despite several consecutive years of economic growth, which reached 5 per cent in 2005–2006 for the first time in almost three decades (Manuel, 2006).

A targeted poverty alleviation strategy requires public agreement on the nature of poverty and its causes. Inevitably, this invites debate and controversy. Social work and community development practitioners are in an ideal position to contribute to the public debate on solutions to poverty. Gray (1996, 2002) argued for a move to a developmental welfare system as a more sustainable way of responding to poverty. Among other things, Gray (2006) proposed that widespread institutional support was needed to promote developmental welfare. While she recognised the contribution of social security in redistributing money to the poor, she warned about the futility of responding to poverty in an economic system that promoted gross income disparities. In this article, I provide a discussion of the South African government’s commitment to poverty alleviation and
the way in which its strategic initiatives translate into improved livelihoods for the poor. I question the strategies used in this regard and how they respond to a structural approach to poverty reduction. Given that half of South Africa’s 46.9 million population is poor, a coordinated response is needed to bring urgent relief to large sections of society. At the same time, robust debate on structural solutions is needed to promote social justice in South Africa.

**Conceptualising poverty**

The World Bank – which has been the target of much criticism with regard to its mandate, ideological leanings and its conceptualisations of, and response to, poverty – defines poverty in terms of income and consumption levels. In so doing, it focuses on the inability of individuals to generate sufficient income. Poverty is said to be reduced or eliminated when people achieve a minimum standard of living. Paulo Freire (in Burkey, 1993: 30) provides a structural perspective arguing that:

One must go beyond criteria based on indices of per capita income as well as those which concentrate on the study of gross income. The basic elementary criterion is whether or not the society is a “being for itself”, that is, “its political, economic and cultural decision-making power is located within”.

Wuyts, Mackintosh and Hewitt (1992) claim that an ‘image of poverty’ based on income indices focuses attention on that which is measurable. While this is useful, it deflects attention from less measurable but crucial aspects of poverty, such as power relations and control over resources.

In keeping with this structural perspective, Sen’s (1999) human capabilities approach proposes that poverty inheres in the deprivation of basic human capabilities as a contributor to low income levels. Sen’s human capabilities perspective enhances understanding of the nature and causes of deprivation by shifting primary attention away from means, such as income, to ends which give people freedoms to satisfy needs through the exercise of their capabilities. This theory has had direct impact on practice in South Africa. The Skills Development Act no. 97 of 1998 (Republic of South Africa, 1998a) was passed to develop and improve the skills of people and, in so doing, to improve their capabilities to positively improve their livelihoods through the various Sector Education Training Authorities. This is a start but a great deal still needs to be done to improve the capabilities of the poor in line with Sen’s theory.

Altman (2003) highlights the instrumental relation between low income and low capability, which differs across and between communities and between different individuals within the same community. Beyond this view, however, Alcock (2006) emphasises the importance of social circumstances and social forces in determining people’s abilities to pursue acceptable livelihood outcomes. In this context, Alcock (2006: 35) points out that economic growth, labour market opportunities, educational provision and social security systems provide a crucial social environment within which livelihood standards and social relations can be created and recreated. To this end, of particular relevance to South Africa, social exclusion and vulnerability are seen as having disempowering and marginalising effects on people. For example, the face of poverty in South Africa was identified by the Poverty and Inequality Report (May, 1998) as ‘rural, female and black’. Structural factors – race, gender and rural location, in this instance – severely constrain the ability of the poor to participate in decision making, despite South Africa’s democratic political system. Minimally, ‘public discussion and social participation is central to the making of policy in a democratic framework’ (Sen, 1999: 110). Given this insight, the conservative World Bank has recently expanded its definition of poverty to include the language of voicelessness, powerlessness, risks and vulnerability (Narayan et al., 2000).

Several international organisations working in South Africa to alleviate poverty, such as CARE International, OXFAM and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), draw attention to the intrinsic connection between poverty and the denial of fundamental human rights. For example, the Human Development Report (UNDP, 1997) focused on the denial of opportunities and choices necessary to lead a long healthy, creative life and to a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem and respect for others. The approach of these international organisations focuses on human capabilities and freedoms, on people’s strengths and the assets needed to move out of poverty rather than on attacking the structural or root causes of poverty.

Over the past three decades, mainstream understanding of, and discourses about, poverty have broadened to include notions like human capabilities, but little has been achieved in altering the structural causes of poverty. An understanding of why people stay poor for a long time requires a close look at the underlying structural dimensions that may undermine people’s attempt to escape poverty despite perceived human capability levels. A structural perspective takes the whole of society as its canvass, even seeing things through a global gaze. A structural perspective on poverty has meant an expansion of the definition of poverty to include other, non-material dimensions of living standards, such as human rights. Poverty, as a concept, has been developed further to reflect concerns about vulnerability and risk as well as powerlessness or lack of a political voice. In fact, some scholars view poverty as a political rather than an economic problem, initially originating out of the unequal
and exclusionary process of economic development but accentuating due to the absence of distributive justice (Nuruzzaman, 2000). This paradigm shift in the way poverty is conceptualised and responded to should inform community development and social work practice. In the following section, I will seek to apply this multi-dimensional understanding of poverty to the South African social development context. But first, I provide an overview of the extent of poverty in South Africa.

### The extent of poverty in South Africa

Poverty statistics in South Africa paint a rather daunting picture. While generally categorised as a middle-income country in the United Nations Human Development Report (2006), South Africa is an extremely unequal society. Its Gini coefficient has risen from 0.596 in 1995 to 0.635 in 2001 and its Human Development Index has fallen from 0.73 in 1995 to 0.67 in 2003 (UNDP, 2004) and to 0.65 in 2005 (UNDP, 2006). South Africa’s Service Deprivation Index, which measures the percentage of the population that do not have access to ‘good’ quality basic services, increased from 63 per cent in 1996 to 65 per cent in 2003 (UNDP, 2004). Thus, despite its relative wealth when compared with the world’s poorest countries, there are vast and growing levels of poverty in South Africa. This suggests that in the current global economic context, ‘the racial divide of the apartheid era, left to its own devices, could be entrenched as a deep class divide in the post 1994 transformation period’ (Taylor Committee, 2002: 16).

The devastating effects of the AIDS pandemic, which has claimed nearly two million lives (PlusNews, 2006), has added another vulnerable group to South Africa’s poor: child-headed households. There were an estimated 840,000 orphans in 2003 (Sloth-Nielsen, 2003). A rise to approximately two million orphans by 2010 is expected; one in eight South African children is an orphan (Department of Social Development, 2005). While the exact number of children living in child-headed households is not known, anecdotal evidence suggests that the phenomenon is widespread (Sloth-Nielsen, 2003). The Department of Social Development (2005: 2) warned that:

The epidemic exacerbates the difficult circumstances of many children in South Africa that result from poverty, lack of access to resources and services, minimal infrastructure, fragmented families and violence and abuse against women and children. This is eroding precious and hard won development gains made since 1994.

Clearly, South Africa’s young democracy is faced with a daunting task, one which can render the hard fought struggle for freedom futile. Below, I show the competing ideals that have informed poverty alleviation strategies in post-apartheid South Africa.

### Competing development ideals

Historical responses to poverty can be traced through examining the sociopolitical mechanisms or policies put in place at any particular time. Welfare policies provide evidence of past attempts to take care of the diverse needs of vulnerable populations. The nature and scale of these provisions is directly dependent on ideological explanations of poverty and inequality dominant in a given society at any given time. In South Africa, policy discourses on poverty and inequality in the post-apartheid era reflect competing ideologies and diverse initiatives to address poverty and inequality.

On the one hand, there is South Africa’s macro-economic framework called GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy, 1996). This neoliberal strategy was adopted by the South African government, at least in part as a result of its assessment that within the geopolitical and economic constellations there were few alternatives to a conservative, supply-side oriented economic policy, especially in emerging markets. With GEAR and subsequent policy initiatives, such as the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA Task Force, 2006), South Africa has shown a leaning towards a market-oriented economic ideology (Bond, 2004, 2005). As such, the development discourse in post-apartheid South Africa, evident in the Reconstruction and Development Programme [African National Congress, 1994] and the White Paper for Social Welfare (Department of Welfare, 1997), has been overlaid by a residual welfare agenda, which calls for community self-reliance and warns against the creation of dependencies among welfare-service users.

On the other hand, there exists a leftist counter discourse of social justice and solidarity from proponents within government and civil society. Here, the ideology of collective responsibility to overcome the legacy of colonialism and apartheid is dominant. Poverty and inequality are seen as structural problems requiring structural solutions. Historically, poverty is seen to arise from centuries of colonial and apartheid oppression wherein indigenous populations were systematically robbed of their land, their productive assets, their cultural heritage and their self-respect. The historic disinheritance of the vulnerable and poor has been exacerbated and entrenched by contemporary global political and economic conditions (Terreblanche, 2002). While the poor and disadvantaged are seen to have agency, i.e. their ability to make and sustain positive changes in their own lives, 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.

Civil society – non-government organisations and coalitions, ranging from trade unions to the council of...
churches to issue-based social movements and lobby groups – has been vocal in calls for a structural response. Social workers and community developers have not, however, been vocal in these debates. This is largely because community development as a separate occupation is relatively new in South Africa, having hitherto been subsumed in social work, health and other social service professions. Social workers are repositioning themselves as pursuing a developmental (proactive) agenda rather than a therapeutic (reactive) role (Gray, 1996). In addition, some of these professionals have not kept abreast with the functioning of the State, which has undergone fundamental changes since 1994, though there is some emerging evidence that this might be changing (see Weyers, 2007). With decentralisation, various spheres of government have been given different mandates, with the local government sphere increasingly taking on a developmental role.

A critique of some poverty alleviation strategies in South Africa

Ideological and political tensions such as those described above hamper attempts to devise a leftist, national, coordinated, strategic response to poverty despite sound policies embedding human rights. If anything, the strategic response has embraced social security as the best and most direct means of lifting people out of poverty (see Hölscher, 2008: this issue; Gray and Lombard, 2008: this issue). Other measures include an expanded public works programme and community-based pilot poverty alleviation projects.

Public works programmes

Public works programmes are designed to develop infrastructure, land and water resources and to provide, as a matter of urgency, employment for vulnerable sectors of the population, such as women and people with disabilities (see Gathiram, 2008 in this issue) through the use of available labour with minimal investment capital (International Labour Organisation, 1979). The South African Urban Foundation (1994) defined public works programmes as public sector funded projects designed to reduce unemployment and economic hardship through job and income provision for those unable to obtain employment elsewhere in the economy. Such programmes have been an important cyclical intervention in developing countries (Griffin, 2003; Levitan, 1976; Subbaro, 1997).

Although much of South Africa’s unemployment is long term and structural rather than cyclical (Barker, 2003; Terreblanche, 2002), the government has, since 1996, allocated substantial amounts of public money to a range of public works programmes for water, housing and infrastructure development. These programmes have been guided by a number of complementary objectives: (i) the creation, rehabilitation and maintenance of physical assets ‘that serve to meet the basic needs of poor communities and promote broader economic activity’; (ii) the reduction of unemployment; (iii) the provision of education and training; and (iv) community capacity-building to enable communities ‘to manage their own affairs [thereby] generating sustainable economic development’ (McCord, 2004: 3). Such complementary objectives, however, are rarely seen as the thrust of the public works programme and are rarely realised (Mubangizi, 2004).

About 220,000 ‘work opportunities’ are created per annum (Skweyiya, 2006), albeit with the proviso that no person may be employed under public works schemes for more than 2 years within a 5-year cycle (Department of Labour, 2002). This constitutes an overachievement on original government plans. Yet based on McCord’s (2004) calculations, 220,000 jobs absorb less than 3 per cent of South Africa’s well over eight million unemployed.

According to McCord (2004), a significant expansion of public works programmes is unlikely due to capacity constraints in both the public and private economic sectors, and due to their lack of financial feasibility. In addition, positive spin-offs for those who participated in public works schemes have been limited. Due to the short-term nature of public works employment, skills transfer is limited and unlikely to enhance employability. To date, public works programmes have not significantly stimulated local economic development, a prerequisite for the creation of sustainable job opportunities beyond public intervention. At the same time, difficulties faced by the poor in accessing credit have prevented self-employment which former public works participants might have otherwise considered. All in all, McCord (2004: 2) concludes that this type of intervention is likely to be most effective if combined with other poverty alleviation measures and warns that:

Public works programmes do not necessarily draw participants into the labour market, but offer a temporary employment sojourn; they do not necessarily move participants out of poverty, but offer a temporary respite, reducing the depth of poverty during the period of employment, and they do not [on their own] offer sustainable livelihood improvements.

The above serves to illustrate that while short-term employment as provided under the public works programme might make an important contribution to the household’s wellbeing, it does not necessarily take the household out of poverty. As such, it does not address the structural or root causes of poverty.

Social security

In view of the structural nature of unemployment and poverty and the limited range of public works programmes, a
heated debate has been raging over the purpose and scope of South Africa’s social security system, which comprises both cash and in-kind benefits (Gray, 2006). The former are administered by the Department of Social Development (Patel, 2005). Cash transfers are means tested and residual in nature. They are aimed at addressing income poverty among the ‘neediest’ and ‘most deserving’ segments in 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 (which includes persons suffering from full-blown AIDS); and children in foster care.

Since 1994 the government has significantly expanded in-kind benefits to address non-income poverty or poverty of assets and capabilities. In-kind transfers may involve transfers of commodities, such as basic food-stuffs, or services such as health, education, nutrition and housing, and energy subsidies to poor and vulnerable groups. Benefits include free basic medical care to pregnant women and children under the age of six; school-feeding schemes; food parcels and clothing distributed at community level to households with terminally ill family members and child-headed households; home-based, day and after-school care services directed at the same target group; provision of free water; and housing and public transport subsidies. In providing these programmes, it is hoped that ‘opportunities will open up for people to improve their income earning capacity and as a result to address levels of destitution and poverty’ (Taylor Committee, 2002: 55). In-kind transfers are politically more acceptable than cash transfers (Levitan, 1976; Subbaro, 1997; Wuyts et al., 1992).

In comparison with other developing countries, the South African social security system is relatively comprehensive. Nonetheless, the system’s efficiency and effectiveness is questionable; cash transfers often fail to reach the most vulnerable and poor. As already mentioned, despite the child support grant, about two thirds of children in South Africa grow up in poverty. Children in child-headed households cannot access grant payments as these must be paid to an adult holder of a South African identity document (Sloth-Nielsen, 2003). Many child-headed households are supported by adults not living in the same household who receive the grant on their behalf. This subjects these children to the potential risk of exploitation and abuse.

Adults, too, struggle to bear the costs associated with applying for grants, such as accessing transport, obtaining an identity document and producing the documentation required for compulsory means testing. As a result, many people who would actually qualify for a state grant under the present system do not receive one. It is estimated that with full uptake, the poverty gap in South Africa could be closed further from 23 to 37 per cent (Taylor Committee, 2002). Gray (2006) has questioned the sustainability of this system and is of the view that welfare policy should rather be geared to broadening opportunities for people’s participation in the economy rather than in making them dependent on welfare.

Finally, ‘the poor have particular difficulties in accessing healthcare and primary education because they do not have even the most basic income for transport, food and basic clothing’ (Taylor Committee, 2002: 56). Water, telephone and electricity cut-offs on account of non-payment have affected well over 10 million people in the past few years, undoing major achievements made in connecting the poor with essential assets (Bond, 2005). While it is assumed that government programmes addressing capability and asset poverty will, in the long term, produce social and economic dividends, ‘in the immediate term their policy efficiency, especially with regard to those poorest people in the rural and informal areas, is being compromised because of unsustainable levels of income poverty’ (Taylor Committee, 2002: 56). Thus, the Basic Income Grant (BIG) Finance Reference Group (2004) bemoans the fact that income poverty undermines social and economic development in South Africa.

Poverty alleviation projects (PAPs)

The responsibility for poverty alleviation cuts across sectors of government and social institutions. However, the Department of Social Development bears the primary responsibility for reaching ‘the poorest of the poor’, most of whom live in the rural areas. To this end, it has developed targeted programmes for women, youth and people with disabilities, which include the formation of collectives with a view to providing basic skills training in conjunction with start-up capital and ongoing support for income generation projects.

PAPs are funded mainly from the Poverty Relief Fund which was introduced by the National Treasury in 1997. Between 1997 and 2004, a total of R640 million (approximately 67.4 million Euros) was channeled from this fund through the Department of Social Development – via its Development and Support Services Program. The latter consumes only 1.5 per cent of the Department’s budget, compared with 4.4 per cent for the Social Welfare Services Program and 9.7 per cent for the Social Security Program (Poggenpoel & Oliver, 2005).

PAPs were implemented by social workers who were not always trained in nurturing community development initiatives, though Weyers’ (2007) recent research shows that this might be changing. However, Sewpaul and Hölscher (2006) observed that statutory services and institutional care continued to constitute the bulk of welfare work with minimal developmental and preventative services. However, Poggenpoel and Oliver (2005) noted that the facilitation of poverty alleviation projects remained the exception and depended largely on the creativity of social workers in using gaps that opened from time to time in their statutory routines.
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 . . . It seems that lack of capacity and effective administrative systems and processes are issues that the Department of Social Development needs to pursue (Poggenpoel & Oliver, 2005: 31).

It is such gaps that social workers and community development practitioners are ideally suited to fill. In addition, and of concern to community development practice, a recent study on service delivery for rural poverty concluded that:

Unless effort is made to include the poor in the delivery process, it is possible that poverty alleviation programmes will turn out to be agent driven without beneficiaries having any say in the conceptualisation, implementation and evaluation process. A direct result of this is that poverty alleviation programmes will not address the causal issues, nor will they empower the poor to any level that removes them from, or substantially alleviates poverty (Mubangizi, 2004: 219).

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 participants, or that poverty alleviation programmes are not welcomed by South Africans. For example, Zungu (2006) counted 46 income-generating projects in the rural district of Nongoma in KwaZulu-Natal alone, including poultry farming, carpentry, sewing, leatherworks, vegetable gardening and block-making. He claimed that while not all of these projects were successful, others were able to generate incomes of up to R1,000 (approximately 105 Euros) per month per project member. In addition, positive spin-offs included economic empowerment of the participating women, increased levels of school attendance by children whose parents were involved in these projects and a general sense of satisfaction among project members on account of their being able to exercise more control over their lives (Zungu, 2006). However, on the whole:

The current range of poverty relief projects, while in many cases innovative and responsive, are unable to make any significant impact on mass based unemployment and levels of income poverty in the immediate term. Many of these projects are also not cost efficient in terms of their outcomes (Taylor Committee, 2002: 56).

This clearly presents a challenge for community development practitioners who have, by and large, supported the Department of Social Development’s paradigm shift towards project and community-based developmental, preventive welfare services.

Some lessons from social work and community development practice

If poverty were to be seen not only in terms of low income or inadequate resources, but also in terms of structural factors embedded in historical, cultural, social and economic practices, then particular challenges would follow for poverty alleviation. From this point of view, the preceding discussion on poverty alleviation strategies in South Africa points to three interrelated factors that practitioners need to consider: First, poverty alleviation strategies need to be mainstreamed as a strategic response to the structural causes of poverty. If, for example, a public works programme were to incorporate a skills development component, a human rights and an HIV and AIDS awareness campaign, it would be more likely to help the beneficiaries build sustainable initiatives than would one that merely provided short-term income grants. Emphasis here should be on mainstreaming rather than integration; the latter is merely an ‘add on’ of activities into an ongoing programme, which rarely achieves lasting results (Gylswyk, 2004). Second, the inability to include beneficiaries in the planning and implementation of poverty alleviation strategies fails to deal with poverty from a structural point of view where the goal is inclusivity and engagement to bring the poor into the country’s economy as contributors and beneficiaries. When the poor are excluded, there is a tendency for them to view such programmes as privileges bestowed on them by the State rather than as rights to which they are entitled as citizens. The Bill of Rights, embedded in the Constitution of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996), creates a human rights culture that is not being harnessed to address the concerns of the poor. Two landmark cases that did this effectively were the Republic of South Africa versus Grootboom (2000) housing appeal, and the Treatment Action Campaign against the Minister of Health (2002) to procure the provision of medication for HIV pregnant mothers. Both demonstrated that, from a structural perspective where the goal is inclusivity, the Bill of Rights can be used to benefit the poor in South Africa. Third, the lack of an integrated input from a multiplicity of role players, which poverty alleviation programmes typically involve, does not adequately respond to the multidimensional and structural nature of poverty. Therefore, responding to poverty simultaneously requires structural, community-based interventions, all of which fall within the ambit of the social service professions (Gray, 2000).

Following a recommendation by the Presidency in 2000, community development workers were identified by some government departments as a cadre of civil servants that would fill the gap between government
services and the intended target communities (see [http://www.info.gov.za/issues/cdw.htm](http://www.info.gov.za/issues/cdw.htm)). Their deployment is still in its early stages and the infrastructure to support them is only now unfolding. However, accumulating experience points to the following insights.

First, it is important that the poor are made aware of their rights and the services available through citizen education programmes. In the absence of such awareness, they would not be able to make demands on the State nor would they access mechanisms to enforce them, such as local government planning systems (RSA, White Paper on Local Government, 1998b), the Constitution of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996) and The Municipal Systems Act (32 of 2000). These spell out a clear expectation that municipal development planning should be participatory and inclusive of all citizens. Community development practitioners and social workers have the potential to and are contributing to citizenship education. However, they need to do more to promote awareness of, and address the structural causes of, poverty at a grassroots and macro level.

Second, targeted programmes to those who need state support should incorporate activities that encourage the poor to overcome cultural and economic barriers that entrench poverty. Further support through appropriate learnerships (in marketing, enterprise development and artisan training) could be mainstreamed into public works programmes. Through follow up, supportive local government policies of preferential procurement and enterprise development, such targeted beneficiaries could benefit at a community level in a more sustainable manner. Local government antipoverty initiatives have been known to work in Britain where in the mid 1990s commitment to local poverty alleviation projects expanded significantly (Alcock, 2006). It is important, however, that practitioners be vocal in ensuring that benefits from community development programmes and black empowerment are not captured solely by predatory elites.

Lastly, South African community development and social workers should be more vocal in debates on socioeconomic and developmental welfare issues with a view to influencing public discourse in general and policy development in particular. This entails facing questions of institutional coordination and capacity-building, as well as broadening the skills base of community development and social work practitioners. In conclusion, the institutional framework of poverty alleviation draws heavily on partnering and networking between civil society, the private sector and the State. Such partnerships are based on the premise that all role players have, at least on a primary level, a shared understanding of the causes of poverty, how they manifest themselves and how they can be eradicated. It also draws on the understanding that activities towards poverty alleviation are aligned and that the responsibilities of each partner are understood by all (Chapel, 1997). The challenges faced by the poverty alleviation programmes of the Department of Social Development in South Africa, and therefore by social workers and community development workers, are premised on exactly this. Key areas of concern include the service delivery process; training of social workers, community development workers and other role players, as well as pre- and post-project support.

It is true that the poor cannot be held responsible for the structural causes of their predicament. But until such time that issues of inclusivity and true community engagement in decision making are attended to, it is extremely important that poor people are supported in developing ‘agency’, albeit within the constraints of the harsh prevailing historical, political, social and economic realities. To facilitate this, social work and community development practice must include conscientisation as to the politics of poverty and underdevelopment, as well as the development of skills and confidence to overcome those hurdles that individuals and communities are indeed able to overcome.

In view of the extent of poverty in South Africa, it would be outlandish to think that social and community development workers on their own could make a significant impact on alleviating poverty to any significant level. However, they can add voice to those who are calling for a reordering of current geopolitical and economic relations. Although South Africans like other African people are no strangers to self-reliance, one cannot expect the poor to bear sole responsibility for uplifting themselves from poverty. Community development practitioners and social workers ought to play a proactive role to enhance people’s political awareness and buoyancy. They need to support self-reliance initiatives at the community level as well as lobby for supportive policy and institutional support to increase capability in this regard.

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**References**


