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Rural Development in South Africa: Implications for Social Work Practice +

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ABSTRACT

An attempt will be made in this paper to describe the shared characteristics of rural communities, especially the lack of resources which lead to a failure to gratify the aspirations of the inhabitants of rural areas. Community involvement or participation may be utilised as a tool to conscientise rural communities about the need to change their deplorable situation. This could be done without necessarily disrupting the existing pace of life in rural areas. Mention is also made of the types of resources which can be employed in rural development and the need to use these resources optimally. This could however only be achieved by overcoming some of the obstacles to rural development such as illiteracy dependency and apathy. Lastly the paper deals with rural development in a post-apartheid era.

Common Characteristics of Rural Areas

In South Africa a large percentage of the black population lives in the rural areas. Almost all of these areas do not have adequate resources such as water, educational facilities and employment opportunities. This is caused by the inequitable distribution of resources in South Africa which has resulted in urban areas enjoying a higher quality of life at the expense of the rural. Buxon (1976:29) defines a rural area as one:

"...that lags behind in population per square mile, in education, in a variety of experiences and finally, in the power to control its own destiny, compared to more urban areas."

Bester (1994) states that rural areas are characterised by a primitive agriculture, low income and a lack of finances and technical skills, especially among black people.

The above observations fit the description of rural areas in our country. We know that black people in South Africa have been unjustly treated by the system of apartheid. According to McKendrick:

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"...this system effectively dispossessed them of their human rights, dignity and self-determination. The advent of British colonial rule and the subsequent apartheid policy enforced and consolidated the legacy of separate development in a systematic and dehumanising manner, placing concerted effort on the provision of services mostly for utilisation by the "fortunate minority" at the neglect of the "disadvantaged majority" (McKendrick, 1990:15).

Djukanovic & Mach (1975) state that rural communities are characterised by:

- economic stagnation;
- agricultural underdevelopment and lack of alternative employment opportunities;
- poor quality of life because of the security of essential goods, facilities and money;
- isolation caused by distance and poor communications;
- an unfavourable environment exposing people to communicable diseases and malnutrition;
- inadequate health facilities and lack of sanitation.

In an explanatory study conducted by Gumbi (1992) concerning the aspirations of rural communities, it was found that the aspirations they expressed included adequate housing, favourable living conditions, work opportunities, proper education, well balanced meals, health facilities, adequate transport, political freedom, more land and shopping centres. These are genuine aspirations which I believe we all have. Unfortunately it is difficult to satisfy these aspirations in our grossly neglected rural areas. Hence the majority of the inhabitants of these areas feel pressurised to migrate to the urban areas, far away from their families. This situation predisposes the family unit towards all sorts of social problems. For instance children are displaced because of the lack of proper parental control. Women become *de facto* heads of families without strong support systems. We can clearly see her that the source of all these problems is the poor living conditions in the rural areas.

It is heartening to observe that the main objective of the Reconstruction and Development Programme is to address all the above-mentioned problems. Hopefully as employment opportunities are created in the rural areas, the trend of migration to the urban areas will be reserved. South Africa has been divided into nine regions which are presently operating as provincial governments. Region G which embraces the former Lebowa, Venda and Gazankulu Homelands and forms part of the Northern Province is commonly regarded as the poorest region because of its lack of resources. My observation of this region is that it has ample potential

to create employment opportunities, for instance, good quality fruits and vegetables are produced in this region and they supply the markets in the urban areas. There is a great need to process some of these products within this region to produce by-products such as orange juice, tomato sauce, fruit chutney, etc. The products of the vast tree plantations could be used to establish furniture factories. It can thus be seen that if appropriate action is taken, not only in Region G, but also in other regions which are endowed with natural resources which are processed elsewhere, the present unsophisticated rural economies could be converted into modernised industrial economies.

There are presently indications that some of the highly industrialised countries such as Britain, Taiwan, Japan and Germany are interested in investing in South Africa and creating much needed employment opportunities. Through the use of the expertise of such countries it is possible to exploit the existing raw materials found in the rural areas, and to make a positive impact on the present poor quality of life found there.

Some Perspectives on Participation

The objective of community involvement in rural development should be the liberation of the poor and the disadvantaged in rural areas. Sewpaul (1992) states that a "people centred" approach should be maintained involving their conscientisation, thus ensuring their participation in this process of liberation.

It is necessary here to caution that some enthusiastic community developers may be tempted to impose themselves on rural communities. While it is true that it may appear to outsiders that emergency action is required, it is increasingly recognised that the inhabitants or rural communities may not always recognise 'the emergency' or the nature of the problem as seen by the so-called expert. Hence they may deeply resent his intervention. Such an approach may engender reactions of suspicion, hostility, or increased insecurity and apathy. The reason for this behaviour is that sometimes people feel secure in their own insecurity. This is an ironical situation which should be understood by community developers. Thus in involving rural people in development projects the community developer should resist trying to pressurise people to accept techniques, services or projects which have been conceived without their involvement.

It should also be recognised that most rural communities have their own techniques and pace for carrying on the business of life. While these may be altered, they cannot be changed radically without disrupting the life of the people. The involvement of rural communities should thus take cognisance of the fact that the pace developed by the community may seem extremely slow to the outsider, yet

this deliberate pace permits adaption both to change introduced and to the many-sided effects arising from the change (Dunham, 1970). To allay the fears of rural communities it is essential to observe transparency at all times, by identifying needs with them.

Rifkin et al (in Bjaras, et al 1991: 200) define community participation as:

"...a social process whereby specific groups of people with shared needs living in a defined geographic area actively pursue identification of their needs, take decisions and establish mechanisms to meet their needs."

Based on this definition, Bjaras, et al (1991) present five factors that ensure and influence participation. These factors are:

(i) Needs Assessment

This refers to the process of identifying and prioritising the needs existing in a particular area.

(ii) Leadership

Leadership is significant in mobilising people around a particular issue and enabling them to establish realistic objectives.

(iii) Organisation

In order to become effective the community should not operate in a haphazard manner. It is necessary to have an acceptable level of organisation in order to avoid overlapping and duplication which may lead to a waste of scarce resources.

(iv) Resource Mobilisation

The community should identify both internal and external resources and take appropriate action to utilise these resources optimally.

(v) Management

Resource mobilisation is inextricably linked to resource management because once identified or created resources should be maintained through sound management to ensure their continued use. Without proper management valuable resources could be easily destroyed.

Participation is not an easy process. Lund (1987) warns about the abuse of "participation" on poorer countries and rural communities, where community participation has often just meant contribution of labour towards the development

of rural infrastructure. Participation can also be used to strengthen existing patterns of power and authority – that is to maintain the status quo, which we know is not acceptable. Such a situation negates the change potential of rural development.

The Need for Conscientisation

In view of the complex processes and dynamics of participation, an essential prerequisite to participation or involvement is conscientisation. The concept of change through conscientisation was espoused by a Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire (1970). He maintained that the role of professional helpers in relation to the oppressed was to draw a critical consciousness in those they aided. Conscientisation can be defined as the:

“...awakening of consciousness, a change in outlook, an increased, accurate and realistic awareness of society (and self), the gaining of a new encompassing view of the world, and the relationships between individuals and groups. It also signifies possibilities and action of a logical nature aimed at the transformation of society” (Ramachandran, 1988:17).

The extensive campaigns and community forums which were held prior to the elections in this country have resulted in a high level of conscientisation. As a result people became acutely aware of their circumstances.

Conscientisation is thus a process through which people achieve awareness of socioeconomic, cultural and political realities which shape their lives. It involves realisation of the capacities, and the actualisation of those capacities to transform such realities. In my view conscientisation amounts to the creation of the will to change, which is an essential ingredient of community involvement, because if the will to change is absent, it will not be possible to involve the community meaningfully.

Conscientisation also implies action and organisation, both of which are strengthened through political participation and political power. Politics here refers to collective decision-making and action at the grassroots level, not necessarily party politics. The thrust of the function of community developers should thus be to inspire among people a desire for and an understanding of change, and the initiation of action towards the desired change.

Types of Resources in Rural Areas

One of the most difficult roles of a community developer functioning in a rural area is that of assisting in the optimal utilisation of the limited resources available in many rural areas. Skidmore, et al (1991:308) state that:

“...it requires imagination and creativity to put resources together in a different configuration in order to serve human beings effectively.”

The community developer should also focus on mobilising existing resources and rearranging them through networking and co-ordination. It should however be mentioned that some basic needs may exist that the local community can do little about, apart from identifying the need, and alerting the responsible authorities to it. For instance, the provision of proper roads, sewage systems, hospitals, etc.

Swanepoel (1992) states that there are four types of resources in any area:

(i) Human Resources

Most of the people in an area are potential contributors whose faculties are important resources. It should however be mentioned that certain societal structures can become obstacles to rural development. For instance, animosities, exclusive interest articulations, differences in political views and church affiliations. All these factors impact on the involvement of people in rural development.

(ii) Natural Resources

Natural resources include water, temperate climate, a good soil type and rainfall. These resources are especially important in rural areas because their absence may pose serious obstacles to rural development efforts.

(iii) Manufactured Resources

Manufactured resources include roads, water reticulation, communication networks, electricity, etc. These are resources which should be provided by the government. There is an alarming backlog of such resources in our rural areas. There is hence a need to address this backlog urgently, if the quality of life is to be improved in these areas.

(iv) Organisational Resources

No resources is of any use if organisational resources are absent. Man's capability to organise is an inherent part of himself. Even the most unsophisticated and isolated society uses its people's organisational capability to arrange its existence.

This valuable resource should be identified and used. There is thus a great need for entrepreneurs who can create jobs by processing raw materials in the areas where they are produced.

Other resources in the community can be divided into the following categories:

(a) Government Agencies and Departments

Several government departments have either offices in the rural areas or will send their officials to visit such areas. A problem that is often experienced with state departments is that they lack coordination. Serious attempts should thus be made to coordinate the activities of various government departments involved with rural development.

(b) Non-Government Organisations

A wide variety of organisations in the category are to be found in rural areas. For instance, the Rural Foundation, which focuses on community development, especially among farm labourers.

Civic organisations are a valuable resource. My observation however is that they tend to undermine established traditional structures in rural areas. This situation creates tension and conflict which are not conducive to community development. It is thus essential to harmonise the activities and aspirations of civic organisations with traditional structures so that they should effectively utilise their efforts for the attainment of common objectives.

(c) Religious Institutions

Religious institutions are an important resource, because they provide a support group to those in need. Church leaders can serve as a vehicle through which the social worker may direct information on health, mental health, and welfare related programmes. Religious organisations can also be used as effective action groups in community development projects.

(d) Selected Individuals

People occupying key positions that can be of assistance will be found in any rural community. People in this category include both the formal and informal leaders. Such people can be trained to be more sensitive to human needs. Many of them are already involved in significant relationships with other people.

(e) Natural Networks

Natural networks are important structures in community development. Such

structures are present in all communities and render a variety of services to people without an outsider being aware of their functioning. Wylie (Koch, 1973:26) summarises the responsibility of the community developer in relation to the natural helper as follows:

“The challenge is to strengthen and expand this natural network by preserving its naturalness rather than imposing professional standards and norms.”

(f) Task Groups

Rural community members should become involved in small task groups which will accept responsibility for working at the identified problems in the community. The community developer should make significant inputs into these groups, but they should also be encouraged to function autonomously. For instance there could be a task group on health, education, welfare or transport matters. In some progressive rural communities such task groups are already in existence.

(g) Mutual Aid Groups

Mutual support groups can serve as a significant resource in rural development. These are groups such as burial societies, women’s groups, single parent groups, health and mental health groups, etc. The community worker should initiate such groups where they do not exist, but as far as possible they should function independently.

Obstacles in Rural Development

This presentation will be incomplete without a mention of obstacles which may be encountered in rural development. It is ironical that the very reason for community development may also become an obstacle. The rural people’s poverty and their lack of self-sufficiency and self-reliance may make it difficult to involve them in development efforts. Some of the attitudinal obstacles are:

(i) Illiteracy

Illiteracy causes an inferiority complex. People are afraid to take part or to be fully involved, thinking that they cannot make worthwhile contributors.

(ii) Customs and Traditions

People feel obliged to follow customs and traditions even if they work against development. The submissiveness to traditional leaders and the inferior position of women are examples of this.

(iii) Dependency

People may have become so used to being dependent on the authorities and other agencies that receiving handouts becomes a norm.

(iv) Apathy

People may accommodate their poverty and misery by accepting it as a way of life. They may be fearful of trying any innovation because it carries tremendous risks.

Rural development projects should recognise these obstacles, address them and to a certain extent accommodate them.

Rural Development in a Post-Apartheid Era

In describing rural development in a post-apartheid era, I would like to align myself with the suggestion made by Louw (1993:97) who has listed several pre-requisites for development during this era. The first pre-requisite is that an interim government should be put into place to enable community developers to become more effective at the community level. This pre-requisite has been satisfied through the establishment of the Government of National Unity which will remain in power until 1999. This government is committed to addressing the development backlogs which are presently existing. In referring to such pre-requisites Paiva (1977: 329) wrote:

"The government of a country must commit itself to the concept of development with due regard to human needs; social justice; and the procurement, development, and application of resources for the well-being of all people, especially the most needy."

It is hoped that our present non-racial, non-sexist and democratic government will uphold such ideas.

Secondly, given the sociopolitical history of our country, it is necessary that a comprehensive review of the existing social policy be undertaken in order to change the quality of life for the vast majority of citizens in the rural areas. For instance budgetary allocations on development projects should give first preference to such areas. Hence such a policy should ensure that there is an equitable distribution of resources such as schools, health facilities, proper roads, water, electricity and basic facilities. The fact that such resources are only concentrated in the urban areas is unacceptable.

The third pre-requisite is the democratisation of the decision-making processes in the service delivery organisations. The political necessity of enfranchising oppressed, marginalised and exploited victims of apartheid has to be implemented also in agencies working at the community level.

The fourth pre-requisite inherent in such transformation is the development of accountability procedures which are effective at the community level. The accountability of agencies to communities should revolve around measures taken to address their felt needs with the available resources.

The fifth pre-requisite to successful community development is commitment to education and training. It is not only the lost generation which merits attention. Non-formal education, and where possible formal education, are essential for increasing the capacity of South Africans, especially those living in the underdeveloped rural areas, to assume greater responsibility for changing their life circumstances.

The present system has been heavily loaded towards curative services for individuals with social problems. State financing of social work has been almost exclusively for poor quality curative social services, especially where black people are concerned. In the new government dispensation, greater priority should be given to the primary prevention of social problems. The decisions regarding the prioritisation of identified needs should be made democratically. It is important to obtain mass participation in determining needs and making crucial choices.

Conclusion

It is clear from this presentation that rural development has many dynamics which need to be well coordinated in order to maximise success. Some of these dynamics are the identification and optimal utilisation of existing resources, encouraging the participation of people in the resolution of their problems by first sensitising them to these problems through conscientisation. This can be achieved by maintaining a "people-centred" approach. Rural development requires having a government committed to development and this entails reviewing the previous social policies which fell short of promoting development in the rural areas. It is possible through the community development approach, to release the vast reservoir of goodwill and positive spirit that South Africans have towards building communities and the nation as a whole. This approach is based on the assumption that everyone has something to contribute to the life of the community.

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