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Social Policy Training and Social Work: The South African Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the nature, context and evolution of social policy training in the South African context. It addresses the definition and scope of social policy, social policy and social work practice in South Africa and deals with social policy content in social work curricula in schools/departments in South African universities. The unique experiences of these departments/schools mirror the wider complexities of South African society, which is undergoing deep-seated changes and transformation in all spheres of life. The major antecedent to such change and transformation was the first democratic elections of 1994 that saw the demise of the former political system of apartheid.

Social Policy Training and Social Work: The South African Context

The paper is contextualised against the proceedings of (and the presentations of four schools/departments of social work in South Africa [1]) at a regional workshop on: "*Social policy training at schools of social work in Eastern and Southern Africa*." The workshop, which was held in Zimbabwe from 1-2 June 1998, was hosted under the auspices of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) which brought together social work academics from Botswana, Zambia, Uganda, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and South Africa. The workshop provided an excellent forum for sharing of information and for critical dialogue regarding the status of social policy training in the Central, Southern and Eastern African countries. Such reflection and action enabled participants to appreciate common regional concerns and the relationship between these regional concerns and the

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international context. It also lent greater appreciation for the need for context-based policy formulation and implementation, thus truly enabling an understanding of the particularity-universality continuum. The developmental welfare policy was the expressed preferred option of all participants at the IDRC workshop. This was not surprising as it was the underdeveloped and developing countries of Africa and Asia that provided the developmental thrust to social welfare.

The exchange of information, the open debates and the interactive nature of the workshop facilitated the identification of two common concerns, for further research, across all of the countries present. The one was on the understanding, among social work academics and practitioners, of the impact of structural adjustment programmes and economic globalisation on the quality of peoples lives in any given country and the need to include such macro-level policy content into social work curricula. The other area of priority was the marginalisation of social work in training of social policy issues. Many of the participants shared the view that the teaching of social policy, although of salience to social work, was being seen as the domain of other disciplines such as political science and sociology. It was envisaged that investigation into such marginalisation might contribute to the transformation of social work curricula in the South-Eastern Africa region. While sharing much in common with their African counterparts, the South African delegation expressed some unique concerns about the historical context of social work education in South Africa and some concerns about social policy curricula content vis-a-vis national development priorities.

Understanding Social Policy

Social policy is a concept that is extremely difficult to define and is perhaps, in some ways, a bit of a misnomer. The social policies of any given country cannot be understood in isolation from that of other public policies related to issues such as electrification, the provision of water, agriculture, employment, legal services, public transportation, public broadcasting, sanitation and sewerage, solid waste collection and finance. Hill (1993:1) in the introduction to his book argued that

"the process of declaring different kinds of policies to be social policies, while disregarding others having a considerable impact on the well-being of our society, seems a particularly arbitrary exercise."

Notwithstanding this argument, Spickler (1995:4) claimed that "*the central focus of social policy is the study of social welfare and social services.*" According to Spickler (1995) the social services popularly include social security, housing,

health, social work (Hill refers to social work as personal social services), and education. Hill (1993) included a chapter on employment policy, as a social policy, highlighting that this brought into focus the impact of economic policies and commercial considerations on social policies. Social policy intersects with many issues, with its formulation and influence impacting across micro and macro levels, as social welfare and social services are channelled in various ways.

Donnison (1975:13) claimed that social policy was "*not a discipline; it is a field in which many disciplines must be brought to bear.*" Social policy is commonly taught across disciplines such as economics, political science, sociology and social work. Given that social policy is inextricably linked to almost all areas of life it would not be unusual for disciplines such as medicine, law, geography, philosophy and history to include aspects of social policy. The nature of social policy is such that it needs to be informed by different disciplines, and the practical considerations of its effects on society requires that "*we accept studies that cannot be defined in terms of discrete intellectual disciplines*" (Hill, 1993:9). Several writers confirm that the purpose of social policy is to make appropriate and relevant responses to social problems, with emphasis on plans of action that direct allocation of resources, development, allocation of status and distribution of rights (Gil, 1981; Billis, 1984).

According to the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997:97), social policy provides "*accepted guidelines for the changing, maintenance or creation of living conditions that are conducive to human welfare.*" Adopting a developmental social welfare paradigm, the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997:10) referred to social welfare as:

"an integrated and comprehensive system of social services, facilities, programmes and social security to promote social development, social justice and the social functioning of people. Social security, social services and related social development programmes are investments which lead to tangible economic gains and in turn lead to economic growth."

As social development policy "*seeks to bring about fundamental changes in various levels of the social structure and changes in value-orientations regarding repressive ethics in respect of human dignity*" (Sewpaul, 1997:4), it coheres with other expressed national development priorities of the South African government.

Social Policy and Social Work

As social policy moves beyond a reflective understanding of people and society, with its primary goals being the translation of intent and objectives into action, it

has particular relevance for social work. Even where social workers are not directly linked to the shaping of social policies, they experience the benefits or constraints of social policies at the levels of community, group and/or individual intervention.

Social policy-making has been traditionally seen to be the domain of political office bearers, with key role-players being the ministers of the state and/or senior public officials. While the responsibilities for policy statements such as statutes, regulations and statements by public officials or politicians (reflecting the decisions of Government) and policy implementation remain largely the responsibility of the state, it must be borne in mind that such policy statements and decisions rest on policy demands. These policy demands should reflect the needs and aspirations of civil society. Given the enormous data base that exists in both formal and informal welfare organisations, social workers are in strategic positions to inform policy content. In the South African context, the formal welfare sector refers to those organisations registered in terms of the National Welfare Act of 1978 and to those financed by the government. Informal welfare organisations are not registered in terms of the National Welfare Act, 1978 and are not subsidised by the Government (White Paper for Social Welfare, 1997). In future the implementation of new legislation, which proposes alternative funding criteria that take into account programme financing, will try to ensure that all organisations are accorded equal status.

By the very nature of their practice social workers can, directly or indirectly, influence policy-making in welfare. Social workers in South Africa are increasingly becoming aware of prevailing social policies and of policies-in-the-making. As South Africa has moved into a participatory and consultative policy-making mode after the installation of the new Government in April 1994, social workers have opportunities to engage in the policy-making process. Various public and private social work organisations, professional associations of social workers, training institutions and other non-governmental organisations have been actively participating in the effort to transform social welfare from the old residual framework to a developmental framework over the past three years. Mazibuko (1995:6) has documented how the welfare sector, through the National Welfare Social Services and Development Forum (NWSSDF) – referred to as the Forum – has organised itself:

"in an inclusive, representative and participatory fashion to engage constructively in the transformation process in its diverse and complex form. The welfare sector realises and acknowledges that the Forum enables it to reach consensus on common critical issues on policy, restructuring and interacting with the government at all levels on these issues."

The White Paper on Social Welfare (1997) was formulated through a wide consultative process, with the Forum playing a major role in the making of the policy. The Forum has served to bring together formal welfare organisations, religious bodies, private welfare organisations, consumer organisations, national councils, voluntary bodies, training institutions, the state, professional associations, non-governmental organisations, and women's groups to participate in the restructuring and transformation process.

The reconstruction and transformation processes that have been taking place in South Africa implies that amended or new social policies and legislation need to be put in place. The gap between needs and the resources available to meet these needs is at the heart of the debate about social policy (Jones, Brown and Bradshaw, 1983). Jones, et al (1983) emphasised that the proper aim of social policy is the pursuit of social justice. In complete contrast to the inhumane apartheid policies that ensured white supremacy and the provision of social welfare services to whites, while the most marginalised and disenfranchised minority groups lived in poverty and despair, new policies that embrace the principles of redistributive justice, equality, fairness, non-discrimination and participatory democracy are being introduced. The legislative welfare changes (the old National Welfare Act, the Child Care Act, and the Social and Associated Workers Act for example, have been reviewed and will be amended or replaced by new Acts) in South Africa confirm that social policies are shaped by, and reflect, political ideologies and electoral appeal (Midgley, 1996). Despite the consultative and participatory processes in South Africa, the reality is that policy-making is essentially a political process. Issues of political expedience may often supersede the recommendations of civil society or policy analysts. Thus, there is no guarantee that the final policy document will reflect the views of citizens. Hill (1993:9) warned that:

"Policies must be understood as products of politics, and attention must be given to the policy creation roles of politicians, civil servants, pressure groups and the electorate."

It is essential that we, as social work practitioners and educators, locate ourselves in society and fulfil our ethical obligation in advocating on behalf of those who are most marginalised. While we align ourselves with the political and social transformation in South Africa, we need to challenge Government where policies do not cohere with professed reconstruction and development principles adopted by the Government.

Social Policy Content Within Social Work Curricula

Several writers have highlighted the negative impact that apartheid has had on social work education and practice in South Africa (McKendrick, 1990; Lowe, 1988; Sewpaul, 1997). Social policy (combined with some of the most atrocious and formidable public policies under the Nationalist Government), if taught at South African Universities would have brought apartheid ideology into question. As social work education and practice over the years served to reinforce Afrikaner nationalism, and to maintain the status quo, social policy, it would appear, remained a largely neglected area in social work curricula.

One of the four departments of social work (University of Natal, Durban – UND) represented at the IDRC conference – taught social policy, as a core course for a period for more than twenty years. The School of Social Work at University of Cape Town (UCT) and the Department of Social Work at the University of Pretoria have recently introduced social policy courses in their curricula, while the School of Social Work at the University of Witwatersrand had, to date, no core social policy course. Through formal and informal contacts with other colleagues in the country (there are twenty-one schools/departments of social work in the country) it would appear that social policy is increasingly receiving focused attention in social work curricula. A review of a 1976 social policy outline, at the Department of Social Work, UND, reflects that although it was a core policy course the focus was on fields of service. Little attention was placed on engaging students in a critical appraisal of the impact of social policies in the South African context. Course outlines of the late 1980s and early 1990s reflect quite a marked evolution in terms of course content. A 1989 course outline where social policy was taught to third year social work students, reflected the following course content:

- social policy definitions, dimensions and determinants;
- social policy processes;
- social planning;
- historical overview of social policy in South Africa;
- relevant social legislation in South Africa;
- social policy analysis;
- critical examination of specific welfare policies and programmes in South Africa;
- social policy and the social work profession.

The outline specifically indicated that the course will "*focus intensively on a critical examination and analysis of South African policy and programmes specifically related to welfare*" (Ramasar, 1989:17).

The evolution of course content appears to reflect the broader political and social changes that were occurring in South Africa in the 1980s and early 1990s, with the abolition of some of the apartheid regulations in terms of influx control, group areas, the differential subsidisation of residential facilities and social workers' salaries on the basis of race, and the increasing pressures (both internally – via the social action and mass mobilisation strategies of groups such as the United Democratic Movement – and externally, with increased international sanctions against South Africa) for a move towards democracy and justice. One of the course goals of the 1992 third year social policy course was to "*consider the policy and structure of welfare within a post-apartheid society*" (Campbell; Tyndall & Meharchand, 1992:5). The course was designed to help students to gain skills in:

- implementing policy in a manner which best serves the interests of the client;
- upholding the values of the profession and questioning unfair policies and practices; and
- motivating for policy changes.

Social policy, as core courses, at the University of Natal is currently being taught at the first, fourth and Masters level. At the first year level students do a course on introduction to policy and the South African context. In relation to policy the focus is on the three conceptualisations of welfare: residual, institutional and developmental. The White Paper for Welfare (1997) and the White Paper on the (RDP) Reconstruction and Development Programme (1994), as national policy frameworks, that were designed to guide practice are discussed. The University of Pretoria has similar course content at the first year level with the White Paper on Social Welfare being a prescribed source of study. At the School of Social Work, UCT, components of social policy are included at the first and second year levels. As in most schools/departments of social work at the undergraduate level, the Universities of Pretoria and Cape Town utilise the various social policies as a framework for the teaching of both generalist and specialist courses.

The transformation of social and other public policies have been occurring at an unprecedented rate since April 1994. This provides an ideal opportunity for educators and students to interface with the policy-making process, on a practical level or through engaging in critical reflection and dialogue about the transformation that is taking place. The impact of this transformation on social policy content is evident, with greater emphasis in theories of development and a focus on social development policy in South Africa. The 1997 course content (taught at the fourth year level at UND) was designed to enable students to:

- understand theoretical issues that affect social policies;
- be familiar with the concepts of social policy, social policy analysis, development and integrated practice;

- be familiar with the overall welfare system and policy processes in South Africa
- develop a critical, reflective and evaluative approach on process and substantive issues in the welfare system in South Africa;
- have knowledge and the ability to relate policy to their practice experience during the current academic year; and
- be able to identify policy-related social work roles and activities using their field placement experience and theoretical knowledge of policy.

There is a focus on contemporary policy-making processes where students are expected to "*acquaint themselves with ongoing debates and discussions on welfare policy at local, provincial and national levels*" (Mazibuko, 1997). At the Coursework Masters level (Department of Social Work, UND) social policy is taught over twelve two-and-a-half to three-hour sessions over one semester. The course is intended to help participants (who are generally social work practitioners) to:

- understand what social policy is, and why it is important for workers in the welfare sector to engage with policy issues;
- understand the relationship between social welfare policy and other policies in the social field, such as primary health care, nutrition, early childhood development and population policy;
- understand the relationship between public and private provision in the social sphere, and between formal and informal provision of services;
- understand the process of policy formulation;
- understand how both social workers and clients can engage in policy formulation and policy change; and
- understand the importance of research in the policy process (Lund, 1998).

Thematic lectures and seminar presentations have been designed to achieve these objectives. The seminar/lecture themes also cover:

- The international context of changing welfare policy.
- A critical analysis of women and work – with an analysis of time (that women are generally not paid for) as an economic variable and an examination of how interest groups in society organise around policy-related gender issues.
- The South African budget process. Two new initiatives in the field are reviewed – the Women's Budget (Lund, Ardington & Harber, 1996) and the Children's Budget (Kruger & Motala, 1997).
- Social security reforms in the field of child and family care, the relationship between social security and poverty alleviation and the provisions of the new Child Support Grant.

- Social policy and disability. An examination of development policies that are rarely designed to facilitate the economic integration of disabled people into society.
- Policy implementation. How do we ensure that policies are implemented according to their aims (Lund, 1998).

At the University of Pretoria the course on social policy forms part of the Research Module. The current content includes: defining social policy, the process of social policy, the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997) and an analysis of the old and new paradigms of social welfare in South Africa. Professor Antoinette Lombard who represented this Department at the IDRC workshop, supported other colleagues who believed that the incorporation of social policy into other social work courses served to minimise the importance of social policy and marginalised the place of social policy in social work. She acknowledged the limitations of the programme and made several proposals for a comprehensive understanding of social policy that will enable students to truly become shapers of social policy (Lombard, 1998). The core social policy course content, at the Honours level at the School of Social Work, UCT, included:

- perspectives on social policy;
- the Welfare state: Capitalist approach;
- the Welfare state: Social approach;
- social work, social services and social welfare policy;
- models of policy formulation with particular emphasis on South Africa;
- South African social welfare programmes;
- social policy analysis; and
- social policy and social change.

One of the approved academic programmes at the School of Social Work, University of Cape Town, is on: *Social Policy and Management*. The School of Social Work, UCT is, as far as the authors are aware, the first (among schools/departments of social work in the country) to have completed their academic programmes as per the requirements of the National Commission on Higher Education (1996). The course objectives for the new Social Policy and Management are to enable students to:

- identify the political, racial, historical and economic variables which influence policy decision-making;
- analyse, evaluate and develop social policies and programmes in South Africa;
- distinguish the underlying principles of major theories of organisation and management and to recognise major influences on individual and organisational behaviour; and

- identify the major impediments to effective management and to develop solutions to counter the same.

Where social policy is taught, as core courses, in other Departments of Social Work in South African universities, such as Western Cape, Rand Afrikaans University (RAU), and Potchefstroom, it is at the fourth year, Honours and/or Masters level. Although social policy was not taught, as a core course, even at some of the liberally-oriented universities, such as the University of Witwatersrand, social policy did (and still does) serve to inform other social work courses. At the University of Witwatersrand social policy content is included within the following courses:

- Social welfare systems and programmes.
- Introduction to community work.
- Contemporary issues in social work and social welfare (third year).
- Contemporary issues in social work and social welfare (fourth year).

Social policy is dealt with and traced from the past political system to the present one. The contemporary issues course in the third year involves a review of a number of different social welfare systems, with an examination of welfare systems in countries like Britain, Zambia and South Africa. The various philosophies that undergird these welfare systems, and the socioeconomic and political forces that shape these systems are discussed. At the fourth year level, the contemporary social issues in social work sequence consists of a course on social change and development. Here the relationship between social policies and development is examined. The course looks at how global forces impact on the formulation of social policies in local contexts, with an emphasis on regional and local issues. The impact of context-specific issues (such as power relationships, class divisions, and socio-political and economic circumstances) on the development and promulgation of social policies are addressed, as is the examination of how social policies may hinder or enhance social and economic development in a country. The course also deals with the disparities in wealth and income in specific localities in developed countries as well as in the least developed countries. Despite this content, the exclusion of social policy, as a core course, was seen as a major gap in the social work curriculum by Noyoo (1998). This meant that policy could be included or excluded depending on how partial the educator was towards social policy.

Noyoo (1998) made an interesting observation in relation to the more liberally oriented English-speaking universities in South Africa that did not teach social policy as a form of protest action. One of the reasons for not teaching social policy as a core course at the School of Social Work, University of Witwatersrand,

according to McKendrick (cited in Noyoo, 1998) was that such inclusion would have been construed as support for the then Nationalist government. Noyoo (1998) pointed out the inherent flaw in such reasoning, as students were not given the opportunity to interrogate social policies and to develop critical understanding of the relationship between social policies and peoples' welfare. This assertion of McKendrick's is, indeed, incongruous in view of the fact that he identified social workers' contribution to social policy as an area of priority (McKendrick, 1990). Acknowledging the roles of some groups within the social work profession that advocated for alternative models of apartheid-free welfare systems, McKendrick (1990:17) contended that:

"South Africa's social policy is ... seriously impaired by apartheid. A priority function for social workers is to vigorously oppose this situation. Only when apartheid is removed from social policy will we be able to get down to the real issues that have to be addressed, namely the needs that people have in a developing, industrialising, urbanising society."

If social workers were expected to "oppose this situation" and reformulate policy, they would have needed skills in policy analysis. Policy analysis means that social workers, as policy analysts, need policy-relevant information in terms of the origins of the policy, the population that it is intended to reach, processes of implementation and its impact on society. It is, therefore, not surprising that Mamphiswana & Noyoo (1997:16) concluded that: "*South African social work education was somehow skilfully designed to mis-educate social workers. This was the mission of the entire South African system.*"

Conclusion

The considered views of colleagues at the IDRC workshop, the major historical shifts that have occurred in South Africa, the radical transformation of the South African welfare sector, and the strategic positions that social workers are in to inform the policy-making process and to act as policy analysts, means that South African schools/departments of social work have to accord social policy prominence in the curricula. As described in this paper, social policy is regarded with varying emphases by different schools/departments across the country. The general trend is that social policy is being increasingly seen as an area that warrants special consideration in social work curricula. Where past records were available and reviewed, as at the University of Natal, a definite evolution in the course content was noted over time. Given the limitations of social work curricula of the

past, with the negative impact of apartheid on social work education and practice, there are obvious gaps in the curricula of South African schools. Many of the gaps of the social policy courses have been identified both by those schools/departments represented at the IDRC workshop and by other colleagues. One of the outcomes of the IDRC workshop was the initiation of contact, via electronic mail, with other schools/departments of social work across the country about social policy content. This in, itself, serves to heighten awareness about the need for such content and has contributed to the sharing of information across some of the departments/schools of social work. It is hoped that this would contribute to review of curricula on a wider scale.

South Africa has, in principle, adopted a developmental welfare policy, which is distinguished from the residual and institutional models, by its attempt "*to integrate social and economic policies within an ongoing, dynamic developmental process*" (Midgley, 1996:3). In view of this, one of the major gaps in the social policy curricula is the lack of macro economic and political theories that should inform practice that is entrenched within a political-economy ideology, a view elsewhere endorsed by Sewpaul (1997). The reciprocal interactions between policy and any given society are complex. Attention must be given to international, regional and national social and economic conditions that create the need for particular policies. This has particular relevance when one considers the government's policy, for inclusion of global economic policies through GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution). In contrast with the holistic socioeconomic developmental approach of the RDP (1994), GEAR adopts a narrower fiscal approach with emphasis on fiscal austerity (through rationalisation and curbing of state expenditure); lowering of interest rates; trade policy favouring export-led growth; privatisation of state enterprises and labour market reforms. The virtual demise of the RDP (that once held out hope for a better life for South Africans) and the introduction of GEAR, as a macro-economic policy, has already impacted on socioeconomic development with more than 100,000 jobs being lost in 1996 and the gross domestic product being reduced to -0.8 per cent in the first quarter of 1997, with inflation at 9.9 per cent and bank interest rates remaining the highest in the world. This confirms the view that such economic globalisation serves to protect the rich and powerful, rather than offering new alternative economies or opportunities for the poor (Oxfam, 1997). According to Singh (1998:32):

"In the present climate of financial turmoil, there are growing, beguiling calls to abandon fiscal orthodoxy, drop privatisation, and opt out of globalisation – in short to scrap Gear."

Economic globalisation impacts on international trends in almost all areas of life. We need to balance such international trends against historical, socioeconomic, political and cultural realities of national and local contexts. Although policies are formulated in response to social and economic problems, policies themselves influence the nature and character of societies in which they are adopted. The reciprocal relationship between society and social policies need to be built into social policy curricula.

This is the most opportune time, in South African history, to engage students in the critical analysis of draft policy documents that are being produced on a regular basis and to get students to engage in the policy-making process, even though they may not be directly involved in the ultimate decision-making processes. The ultimate challenge to educators is to train social workers who are capable of becoming involved in the analysis, formulation, implementation and evaluation of social policy.

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