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Rural Poverty, Social Development and their Implications for Fieldwork Practice*

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ABSTRACT

A most unsettling observation is that rural poverty is on the increase, despite decades of rural development. The blame is currently being placed on modes of designing and implementing development programmes, which are seen to have failed to take the basic needs of the poor into account. Further blame is placed on historical factors together with the social structures that have developed from them. The paper examines a selection of current ideas about rural poverty and their implications for the practice and teaching of fieldwork in social development, and points out the issues involved, giving suggestions on how they might be dealt with.

Introduction

A most unsettling current observation about poverty, particularly rural poverty in Africa, is that it is on the increase, both in incidence and intensity, despite the wide variety of national and international measures undertaken to eradicate it during the last two decades. The failure of these measures has been attributed to a multiplicity of causes, of which the following are the most frequently mentioned and emphasised: inadequate conceptualisations of development and poverty; a failure to identify and to emphasise the true underlying causes of the problem; wrong programmatic prescriptions; a lack of organisational requirements for programme implementation, and various combinations of these shortcomings. An excursion through the vast literature on poverty and development would readily reveal that current perceptions of, and approaches to, the problem of poverty are partial in scope and neatly reflect the case of the proverbial blind men and the elephant, in which men mistook the individual parts for the whole beast. For example, many national Governments in Africa have tended to treat poverty as a purely economic problem that could be overcome by means of carefully planned and

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implemented economic development programmes. But this approach has led not to a reduction in poverty but to mere increases in average incomes and GNP, a situation depicted by Griffin and Khan (1978) in these words:

> "in most developing countries, rising average incomes and GNP have not led to a visible improvement in the living standards of the masses of the people. Eradication of hunger and poverty, the ultimate goal, is *further away than ever before.* Close to 1,3 billion people have incomes less than U.S. $200 a year, and more than half that number—an estimated 750 million people—*are utterly destitute,* lacking the most rudimentary requirements for human dignity".

This observation indicates clearly that aggregate economic development does not necessarily lead to poverty reduction and that a better way to assess the impact of economic development programmes on the welfare of the people is by examining separately the benefits that have accrued to the various groups, particularly the socially vulnerable groups. This is how the economic development efforts of the last two decades have been found to have poorly focused on the poverty problem.

This autopsy of past poverty programmes in the Third World suggests that an effective solution to the problem is very demanding in its knowledge requirements. It requires sound analysis, valid diagnosis, pertinent prescriptions, and a knowledge and availability of organisational requirements for the implementation of prescribed programmes. In this regard, the following guiding questions must be seriously considered: who are the poor? what are their distinguishing characteristics? why are they poor? where are they located? what can be done to assist them to exit from poverty? and how may society and the poor organise themselves for this task?

Although the social work profession historically came into existence primarily to deal with the problem of poverty and its consequences, social workers have not seriously asked or sought to obtain carefully considered answers to these fundamental questions in their traditional approaches to the problem. In traditional social work the main emphasis has been on relief. But the recent failures of development programmes to reduce poverty in developing countries has led social workers to question their own practice paradigm and to redefine the purpose of development. This move has led to the emergence of a developmental social work perspective which is now called social development. But social development is a relatively new and revolutionary perspective on social problems and social intervention. Social work practitioners and educators have not yet achieved a consensus as to its

content or practice requirements. Therefore, a discussion of the theme "Rural Poverty, Social Development and their Implications for Fieldwork Practice" presents opportunities for examining more closely the nature of rural poverty in the context of a new social work perspective whose concepts and propositions are very much in need of assessment.

The task of this paper, therefore, is to examine a selection of current ideas on poverty in general and rural poverty in particular and their implications for the practice and teaching of social development. The discussion divides into four major parts. The first part considers explanatory, diagnostic, and prescriptive perspectives on rural poverty, which perspectives are abstracted from non-social work literature. The purpose of this is to help remove professional blinkers and to contribute to an interprofessional understanding of the problem.

The second part examines the essence of social development, focusing on its meaning, concepts, philosophy and methodology. The purpose of this part of the discussion is to contribute to a clarification of the content, philosophy and methodology of social development.

Thirdly, the discussion attempts to delineate a social development approach to poverty in general and rural poverty in particular. This part of the discussion attempts to make use of the ideas and perspectives, that have been considered in an earlier part of the discussion, from the non-social work literature. It is hoped that doing this will induce a readiness among social work educators and practitioners to re-examine their existing knowledge, practice skills and attitudes relating to this problem.

Finally, the paper considers the implications of a social development approach to poverty, as delineated here, for fieldwork practice. The emphasis of this part of the discussion is to identify the nature of social development tasks that are relevant to the reduction of rural poverty in Africa, together with their knowledge and skill requirements.

Rural poverty: interdisciplinary analysis and intervention strategies

Poverty is a muiti-dimensional concept that denotes a universally undesirable human condition. It describes varying kinds and degrees of human deprivation in society. Poverty is a complex problem because there are many human needs in society (Maslow has identified a hierarchy of five) which may be only inadequately met or remain unmet altogether, due to a multiplicity of causes.

There are, therefore, many definitions of this human problem to be found in the interdisciplinary literature on the subject, each stressing a given kind or degree of deprivation. Accordingly, the present analysis of the problem is prefaced by a consideration of the basic definitions:

(a) *Basic definitions*

One set of definitions distinguishes between absolute and relative poverty. Absolute poverty is human deprivation in its extreme and most obvious form. It refers to a lack, or deficient supply, of the basic necessities of human life, such as food, safe drinking water, housing, clothing, and health care. A person is said to be in absolute poverty if he or his family cannot supply these basic needs for him. This is a *physiological* definition of poverty. People in absolute poverty suffer from chronic malnutrition and are chronically sick; they live in squalor; they are poorly clothed; they lack access to health care and educational facilities; they live short lives and many of them die in infancy and childhood. Rural poverty in Africa is largely covered by this definition.

Relative poverty, on the other hand, refers to a state of human suffering which results from the inability of a person or group of persons to meet the needs that other people in society have come to take for granted. This is primarily a problem of inequality in society which intensifies as the income gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' increases. This problem exists in all societies, including rural Africa, but it is of the greatest significance in rich countries. In the rich countries of Europe and North America an acceptable standard of living is formally identified and anyone whose standard of living falls below it, whether or not he is able to satisfy his basic human needs, is considered poor and is assisted by the state to raise his consumption to the national minimum. This is a *social definition* of poverty. Relative poverty is not very useful in rural Africa where the majority of the people are subject to absolute poverty.

Another set of definitions of poverty, formulated by Rowntree and his associates (in Brown, 1977) during the nineteenth century, is of some relevance to rural communities in Africa which have just been fully absorbed in the cash cropping economy. Rowntree distinguished between primary and secondary poverty. Primary poverty is actually the other name for 'absolute poverty' which has already been defined here. Secondary poverty, on the other hand, is a situation of deprivation which occurs even when the victim obtains income that is sufficient to purchase the basic necessities of life, but spends some of it on items which do not contribute directly to nutrition, health or good housing. As a result of this pattern of expenditure, this person and his family

often suffer the conditions of absolute poverty. This definition is relevant to analysing the situation of many rural households in Africa which are now devoting all of their productive assets to cash cropping. Most of these families lack budgeting skills, and it is not uncommon to see families in this category use up their cash incomes long before the next crop selling season. Often proceeds from cash sales are spent on such non-essential items as radios, bride-price to obtain a second wife, and bicycles. While these items are useful, they do not directly meet the nutritional and health needs of family members, especially the needs of young children.

A third conceptualisation of poverty places the problem directly in a political context. It refers to poverty as the lack of power to make decisions on matters that intimately affect one's welfare, like the fixing of the prices of one's produce and the establishment of the laws governing the processes of acquiring and disposing of productive assets. This is seldom used in designing measures against rural poverty in Africa.

The analytic purpose of these definitions is to specify the components of the undesirable social situation labelled 'poverty'. According to the definitions considered here, the undesirable components of poverty include the following:

(i) Inability of individuals and families to satisfy such basic human needs as nutrition, housing, clothing, drinking water, education and health care;
(ii) Greatly unequal distribution of incomes, consumption goods and productive assets;
(iii) Lack of budgeting skills in the context of a cash economy, and
(iv) Lack of opportunities to participate in, or influence, decisions that intimately affect one's welfare.

The causal analysis of poverty, to which the discussion now turns, is organised to link these undesirable social conditions to what are considered to be significant causal variables.

(b) *Causes of poverty*

There is growing consensus among rural development analysts and practitioners in the Third World that rural poverty is worsening despite decades of rural development effort primarily because such effort has been founded on poorly conceived causal models. The guiding models of these development efforts

have tended to be single-factor explanations of a highly complex problem and have tended to ignore such important variables as the historical, social, national, and international contexts in which poverty and underdevelopment have thrived. It is therefore proposed to start this causal analysis by examining briefly the historical context of the rural economies of Sub-Saharan Africa. This will be followed by a consideration of selected causal relationships in that historical context in order to illustrate what this paper proposes as being a better way to comprehend the underlying causes of the problem.

Before the advent of colonial forces the rural economies operated independently of the pressures of the international economy and a modern state economy. In such independent, indigenous economies, families operated as autonomous, self-sufficient units. Questions concerning access to productive assets, of production and distribution of output and of disposal of surplus production were virtually entirely matters for family decision. Production relations were indistinguishable from family relations and were virtually free from tendencies of exploitation. It is true that those pre-colonial economies often suffered from natural disasters such as drought and floods. But local level mutual social support systems did provide a reliable safety-net, except where such disasters uniformly affected whole communities. Even then, there existed institutionalised inter-community voluntary exchange relationships to provide cover against such contingencies. It may well be true that those ancient rural economies were superior to modern ones in their ability to meet the basic needs of nutrition and self-determination.

Then enters the colonial era and the modern state. The express purpose of colonial administrations was to organise the extraction of the fruits of native labour and natural resources for export as raw materials for the manufacturing industries of the metropole. For this purpose modern export sectors consisting of mining and agricultural production for export were established, together with networks of marketing boards and export taxes. This led to the emergence of dual economies in Africa in which subsistance economies co-existed with modern export enclaves in a parasitical relationship. Modern export enclaves developed at the expense of the traditional subsistence sectors. In Central and Southern Africa in particular lands of high agricultural potential were annexed and made available to European settlers for plantation agriculture while natives were pushed to geographically isolated marginal lands. Unable to extract an adequate livelihood from the marginal lands and unable to produce enough cash income from those lands to meet their tax obligations, young men had no alternative but to migrate and sell their labour within the export enclaves. Those who remained—mainly women, elderly, and young children—exchanged their produce with consumer manufactured goods on highly

unfavourable terms of trade. In this way the indigenous rural economy lost superior land, superior labour and valuable produce to the export sector. The extracted raw materials and repatriated profits from the import trade constituted significant leakages from rural Africa to metropolitan Europe. This, in brief, is what has been referred to in the literature of Political Economy as the underdevelopment of Africa by Europe (Amin, 1972).

Post-colonial, indigenous Governments of Africa have not done much to alter economic relationships, either internally or externally, and the dual structure of African economies continues basically unchanged. Export enclaves continue to thrive at the expense of the rural economy in order to support urban consumption, and to finance urban-biased social services and economic infrastructures. Even where extension services are made available to the rural sector their design and distribution are biased in favour of the crops and resource profiles of progressive farmers, not the poor.

Moreover, rural development plans and programmes, which are supposed to be implemented by the rural poor, supposedly for their own improvement, are drawn up without the participation of the poor. As a result, these programmes are not properly focused on the basic needs of the poor. Given this historical perspective on rural poverty in Africa significant causal explanations of the problem may now be evaluated.

Three significant explanations of the causes of rural poverty are stressed in the literature by analysts of various intellectual orientations. Very briefly, these explanations assert that rural poverty is the result of:

(i) unfavourable cultural attitudes towards an entrepreneurial spirit which has made for progress in the Western World;
(ii) lack of appropriate market incentives, or
(iii) unfavourable social structures.

It is quite clear from the historical perspective presented above that rural poverty in Africa cannot be explained primarily in terms of traditional attitudes. People in the indigenous rural sector have had restricted access to productive assets. They have also been subject to exploitative trade with Europe.

With regard to the incentive explanation, the argument cannot be sustaine that the rural poor are poor because they have lacked incentives to produce. The rural poor have many production constraints which have not received

adequate and sympathetic attention from public resource allocators. In particular, they have lacked access to credit capital.

Finally, we examine the social structure argument. The social structure argument is far reaching in its implications. It touches on all issues relating to social relations at the family, community, and state levels which involve access to productive assets, utilisation of resources, choice of economic activity, marketing of produce, fixing of prices, disposal of economic surpluses and participation in economic, political and social decisions that affect one's welfare.

A fourth causal factor, which is now assuming increasing significance, is the demographic factor. This factor has three relevant dimensions, that is to say, age-structure, growth rate, and absolute size. Rural populations are characterised by a predominance of young children who are non-producing members of families. High dependency ratios are presenting a real constraint to progress. While they do not produce, young children need to be fed, they need education, and they need health care. For this reason, a high dependency ratio, as influenced by the number of very young children, the aged, and other unemployables, can retard development and contribute to continued rural poverty.

The growth rate of the population is another important contribution to rural poverty. Mujwahuzi (Kiros, 1985) points out that population growth rate has a direct impact on savings and investment. He shows that if the population grows at a faster rate than output there will be a dissaving rather than saving. The growth rate also has an impact on fixed family resources, like land. It means an increasing rate of sub-division of family land at each generation, rendering the land inadequate, a situation which has the potential for pushing part of the rural population to the urban areas where their situation might be worse. The demographic factor clearly appears to have a direct impact on rural poverty.

The causal factors that have been considered up to this point are long term in nature and are what traditional social workers would call predisposing factors. Structural and demographic factors create vulnerability to poverty. However, it is necessary to consider what might be called precipitating factors in the poverty problem. These are episodic shocks for the rural population. Richer households are better able to stand the impacts of episodic shocks than poorer ones. Examples of episodic shocks in the rural producer's environment include drought, floods, epidemics of crop, animal and human diseases, and civil strife. Many rural communities are faced with famines and poverty at its

worst. The most popular explanation of such situations is drought. But drought translates into famine only when the community has been subject to long term vulnerability, a vulnerability which is manifested in small food stocks in the family which may barely last to the next harvest. Families which are strong and have large food reserves will remain safe in a drought for a much longer time than one without a food reserve.

Because of these episodic shocks in the natural environment, there is a seasonal dimension to rural poverty. Seasonal research has shown that there is a concentration of poverty problems for the rural population during the wet season. During the early and middle part of the dry season rural families suffer from relatively fewer diseases and generally have enough to eat and fewer debts to repay, while social and demographic factors, such as child care and deaths, are on the positive side during the dry season. However, during the wet season the situation is reversed. There is a negative increase in each of these factors, which intensifies rural poverty. It is also during this season that extension workers avoid visiting their rural clients.

This causal analysis has sought to show that causes of rural poverty are many and interlocked; focusing on just one variable in interventions cannot be expected to produce effective results. Let us now turn to intervention strategies.

(c) *Intervention strategies*

The foregoing causal analysis reveals three groups of factors in respect of which appropriate intervention strategies must be developed in order to deal with rural poverty more effectively. The three groups of factors in question are:

(i) Structural and institutional factors,
(ii) Demographic factors, including population growth rate, age distribution, and overall population size.
(iii) Seasonal factors.

Taking these in turn, let us identify some of the relevant intervention activities. Introducing and sustaining structured institutional change calls for the organisation of the rural poor and their mobilisation for self-help. But, as Peterson (1982) has observed, organisation in developing countries is a political activity and always generates conflict. Political skills need to be dealt

with for organisation and lobbying. In this regard systems models of social work practice would be useful starting points.

Influencing demographic factors calls for family life education and other population strategies. Here the activities of motivating families to undertake family planning is a value to be pursued.

Finally, influencing seasonal factors requires the setting up of monitoring systems by means of which an early warning system can be established and operated. With such systems in operation episodic factors can be predicted and their impacts reduced.

The essence of social development

Familiar words may mean different things to different people. If people fail to communicate as a result of this, the result may be funny or disastrous, depending on the nature of the issue involved. For example, a funny story has it that Americans and English men who were involved in a formal debate agreed 'to table the motion'. Following this, the Americans proposed, to the amazement of the English, that they proceed to the next item on the agenda. The English men were, of course, preparing for a formal discussion of the motion, and not to ditch it, the American meaning of 'tabling the motion'.

Social development is a relatively new concept in social work and tends to mean slightly different things to different people, yet the issues involved in social development are of grave professional and social importance. While I cannot claim to have had access to all the existing literature on the subject, the sample of the literature available makes me feel somewhat certain that standard works on the subject have not yet emerged. The most recent attempt to develop a formal conceptualisation of social development that I have come across is the small monograph edited by Sanders (1982), which evolved out of a coloquium on "The Developmental Perspective in Social Work" held at the University of Hawaii in 1979. I have depended heavily for inspiration, issues and concepts on the set of papers published in this monograph.

Each of the authors in this book and in other sources I have consulted focuses on one dimension of this broad concept of 'social development'. In general terms, the concept describes a radical change of mission, knowledge base, and practice skills in social work. The background to this radical change is the dissatisfaction among social work practitioners with the negative consequences of past decades of development effort in the Third World. In this sense social development may be interpreted as the proposed package of social

work's contribution to the redefinition of the content, objectives, methods, and social structures for development.

Before we consider the specifics of social development, it is necessary to reflect on the implications of these changes for the continued legitimacy of our claims to professional status. Caution has been sounded in some quarters that social workers may lose credibility due to the excessive enthusiasm with which they are taking on new functions, many of which fall outside their socially recognised area of technical competence. Stein (1976) advises that the legitimate way for social workers to win developmental change roles in society must be rooted in traditional social work practice; that is to say, social workers will be accepted by interprofessional teams concerned with change and development if they can demonstrate through their practice that they have a unique contribution to make. Pinker (1984) goes a little further to the right and advises that social workers should concentrate on doing what they know how to do and resist the temptation to break new ground and dilute the image of the profession. Whether one agrees or disagrees with these views they raise an important issue which must be borne in mind in considering the essence of social development.

Social development has been characterised as "a movement", "a developmental perspective in social work" and a practice mode in social work (Sanders, 1982). It has been defined as " a process of planned institutional change to bring about a better fit between human needs and social policies and programmes". It advocates self-reliance and stresses the need for enhancing of people's capacities to work for their own welfare and that of their society. It also stresses the need to give people the capacity to alter their institutions in keeping with their aspirations and desires. The broad mission of social development is to contribute to the emergence and maintenence of a society in which organisations and institutions are "more sensitive and responsive to human needs" (Paira, 1982). The core skills of social development are "policy analysis, planning, community organisation, programme evaluation and social advocacy", while the knowledge base includes a mastery of the ingredients of "social structures, economic structures, and political structures" (Hollister, 1982). Clearly the familiar labels of the knowledge bases of social development are political science, economics, and sociology, with special emphasis on structures. This is in line with the objective of helping people to alter their institutional structures as the need arises. What needs a more explicit analysis are the skills relevant to social development tasks. The list given here is actually a list of activities rather than skills. For the purpose of identifying practical training content for social developers, it is necessary to

specify the specific skills that are needed in policy analysis, social planning, community organisation and social advocacy.

These have not been explicitly stated anywhere and this paper invites fellow professionals to take up this task.

Another aspect that is stressed in social development is the question of people's values. Social developers are expected to possess skills for 'negotiating values' with the people when social and structural changes are being undertaken. This is necessary to ensure acceptance of change. All of these principles and skills have definite implications for fieldwork practice, an issue we consider in the concluding section of this discussion. For now the discussion turns to a consideration of the social development approach to rural poverty.

Finally, we consider the issue of supervision of students placed in non-traditional settings. This presents the problem that there is no person in the fieldwork practice situation who is professionally qualified as a social developer and who could work as co-teacher. This situation calls for innovation. Schools have to devise schemes for fieldwork assessment in situations where the qualified teacher is not available to observe and assess the student. It also calls for organising regular training workshops for prospective field supervisors from selected organisations.

All the unfamiliar issues that have been raised here and unorthodox procedures that have been proposed to handle them represent the starting point for the indigenisation of fieldwork practice in Schools of Social Development in Africa.

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