

## **Social Work in the International Context of Poverty and Social Inequality**

These brief reflections on social work and poverty provided the introduction to a parallel plenary session during the IFSW world conference in Brazil in August 2008. This is not an academic paper but some thoughts about the interaction between social work and poverty in a global context. Whilst these reflections were prepared for a global audience, the remarks were strongly influenced by the Latin American context and in particular by the lively debate about the ideology and practice of social work taking place in the conference between social workers from Latin America and those from other parts of the world.

These different perspectives present one of the major debates within our profession: to what extent can social work practice be concerned mainly with individual, family and group behaviour or must all social work be focussed primarily on social and structural change? This is a simplification of the debate but summarises the challenge.

Social work practice takes place in a local and national context. It is very often practiced within a legal framework which means that the priorities (and methods) can be very different between different countries. Public agencies usually have a clear duty, spelt out in law or government directions, and the extent to which this can be varied by individual practitioners is limited. A global federation has to take account of all contexts. However social work is always concerned with human dignity, human rights and respect for people.

In practice, all over the world social workers have tended to work with those who have been marginalised or excluded, and who have suffered discrimination for many reasons. The majority of those we work with have lacked material resources. Social workers have therefore always been concerned about poverty, at both the personal (micro) and policy (macro) levels.

The neoliberal economic perspective has dominated macro-economic policies and political debate for the past 20 years. This is based on an economic philosophy which sees behaviour as driven primarily by a competitive concern for personal well-being, if necessary at the expense of others. The maximisation of personal well-being is usually seen as synonymous with increasing personal wealth; people are seen as egoistical, wanting more for themselves. Economic pressures, such as prices and employment, are seen as the most powerful ways to influence and change behaviour and to maximise well-being.

These remarks were given in August, after the big increases in global prices for food and power but before the banking collapse. At that time, I suggested that the power and dominance of neoliberal ideas and economic policy presented a real challenge for the social work profession. The power of capital and of the global political and financial institutions and philosophies was so strong that social work could not realistically change it, even if we criticised it. This applies especially to those social workers employed in public agencies where the government has a strong neoliberal approach. In such countries, social work is sometimes criticised for being a negative influence, undermining self-reliance and weakening economic behaviour. Whilst there may well be opportunities to challenge this prevailing orthodoxy, for social work to survive as a professional grouping or structure in such countries, it is inevitable that social workers have to operate within those economic, social and political constraints.

Since my talk, the collapse of the global banking system and the need for government intervention to support the banks has created a new context for economic and social policy, which has changed the context for social work practice. If governments can intervene with huge sums to support the banks (and therefore the citizens who have money in those banks), why not intervene to support citizens who are marginalised and excluded? We will see over the coming months whether this approach gains public support.

Some have argued that revolution is an appropriate response to these economic and social injustices. This is not the place to rehearse all the arguments. It seems appropriate, however, to note that revolution seems most unlikely in those western countries which have adopted a neoliberal approach. It is also fair to ask whether revolution offers a resolution to the problem. There is now plenty of evidence from different countries that revolution often changes the power elites but not much else - and can end in a similar or worse situation of corruption and injustice.

So what can we do? We see injustice and discrimination. We know it is wrong. We need to respond. The response has to be at the micro and macro levels and has to be adapted to the context. We have learnt from the past 50 years that social policies to fight poverty have had a mixed success everywhere. Very often resources intended to fight poverty go to the middle classes, people who are most able to argue and demand services, and not to the poorest, sometimes despite the best intentions. All across the world we have seen growing gaps between the richer and the poorer, whether they be countries or individuals. Yet macro policies are essential and we need to keep working to make them more effective. Social workers can do this through their professional associations and through other social movements and parties.

At the micro level of daily practice, social workers are used to dealing with poverty and also with the assessment of risk. That is the 'bread and butter' of much of our work. We have to work creatively to help people (individuals and groups) to understand their situation and to change their behaviour and their environment, where possible. Some call this empowerment: helping people to discover their own resources and their own ability to create influence and change. Social workers also have to make tough judgements about risk to individuals and sometimes to use our power to protect people from themselves or from others. Examples include situations of domestic violence, child abuse or mental ill-health. Social workers are often the best placed people to achieve an appropriate balance between individual rights and needs and those of the family or wider community. This same approach must be applied to our response

to poverty. However, our work shows us that economic factors, such as price and employment, are important but NOT necessarily the most important factors which influence behaviour. We have a more sophisticated understanding of psychology than most economists.

Our work with poverty and changing behaviour illustrates the importance of integrating theory and practice and also the need to be clear about our values of respect for people. However in a global context, we have to note that the approach to values differs in important ways in different regions. For example, in a number of 'Eastern' cultures, stability and the preservation of community order are more important values than creating change and individual freedom. Resolving that tension is another key challenge facing the global profession, and in particular the joint IFSW/IASSW group which is reviewing the global ethical principles.

So where does this leave us? We see that much economic theory has been based on a very simple view of the world and a very limited understanding of individual and group psychology. In the post credit crunch environment, we have new opportunities to explore the relationship between economics and behaviour.

I think there is one psychological insight which has strongly influenced our profession and our understanding of ourselves. This insight presents us with a paradox and a challenge. Let me illustrate this with a story – perhaps we can call it a parable. It is a true story which I read on a global ethics website.

The person telling this story had gone to a concert in London. It was in a big concert hall with hundreds of people. There was a large symphony orchestra and also a jazz band. They were there to hear a new piece of music bringing together the classical orchestra and the jazz band. The famous conductor walked on to applause and took his bow. He lifted the baton and the music started. He kept the orchestra and the jazz band playing together, even though this was a new experience for them, bringing in different instruments as the music required.

The new music was a great success. The conductor walked off the stage to great applause. He returned to acknowledge the applause several times and several musicians who had played solos stood for applause. But where was the composer? Everybody knew he was there but he was nowhere to be seen. Winston Marsalis, the great jazz trumpet player had composed the piece but was sitting near the back, playing the third trumpet. He was reluctant to come forward but in the end he was persuaded to do so and there was even louder applause. He had created the experience for everybody but then let it go free for the other performers to make it theirs. But the audience knew the real star and they refused to let him hide away. They needed to recognise the composer and celebrate the person who had made it happen!

I think that is a good description of much social work. We are often the composer or dramatist who works unseen behind the scenes. We develop the scripts and harmonise the melodies. We prepare the stage for the drama to unfold. We are immersed in the rehearsal but stand back to allow the final performance to unfold. Why do we work this way? It reflects our experience that, in most cases, people do not change because they are told or forced to do so! People only change their behaviour for the long term when they want to do so. Telling people to change their attitudes or behaviour rarely works. Social workers know that, for most of the time, we are most effective when we help people to make their own decisions about what to do. We are often very effective at persuasion and encouragement, and we can often see the change happening, but we know that if we claim the credit, the probability is that the change will evaporate. Our success lies in helping people to believe that they made the change themselves; some call this empowerment. So we often deny our influence on the change; 'they did all the hard work, I was just there to support'.

Yet as a profession we face a major challenge, which also presents us with the paradox. If we do not claim our success or effectiveness, will anyone do that for us and why should people keep funding our work if we cannot

show why it is worth it? All around the world I see the need for social work to strengthen our argument for public support and our case for public resources. I often hear people saying that they agree that social workers are well-intentioned and may even do good but, they ask, 'why should we pay for you?'

So in fighting poverty and disadvantage, social workers need to practice the psychology of empowerment and the politics of influence. We need to do that in partnership with those we work with. We need to help them unleash their own resources. But as professional organisations, we also need to find more effective ways to identify our successes, celebrate our achievements and convince politicians and the public that we have answers. Talking with governments and global agencies around the world, I see that they are very aware that there is a growing social crisis and that they need social workers to help deal with the problems. We know that 'solutions' are complex and cannot be taken off the shelf.

There is no simple solution to the world's social crisis, but social workers do have some answers which we need to share. We have to show the maturity and self confidence to claim our achievements and to be proud of our successes. That will help others to celebrate with us and to support the crucial work which social workers do all over the world. Social workers do really make a world of difference. We need to make certain that the world can see this. That will be the focus of the 2010 world conference in Hong Kong and we are inviting all IFSW member organisations and individual social workers to be working now on the social work priorities for the next decade, which we will debate and finalise in Hong Kong. Be a part of it and help to celebrate the achievements of social work!

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