

POVERTY ALLEVIATION: THE NEED FOR A KNOWLEDGEABLE, ACTIVE AND EMPOWERED CIVIL SOCIETY

N Gathiram

University of KwaZulu-Natal

ABSTRACT

Many poverty alleviation programmes have been established in South Africa in an effort to overcome poverty and inequality. This paper explores reasons as to why the problem has worsened, despite all these efforts. An overview of the literature suggests that most of these programmes are project based, with a focus on financial gain and the development of technical skills. The success of these projects has been limited. The author argues that the focus on these "hard" issues is insufficient in dealing with poverty, given the history and context in which it is occurring in South Africa. The neo-liberal macro-economic policy undermines the success of projects. It could in fact sustain poverty and the status quo. It is argued that poverty cannot be overcome without a knowledgeable, active and empowered civil society. People's capacity needs to be developed to challenge the economic, political and social organisation of society.

It is recommended that interventions be more holistic and skills for social empowerment be strengthened. Conscientisation, organising for collective action and skills for transforming policy frameworks are considered important. A list of components vital for social empowerment is presented. Recommendations are made that research be undertaken to explore ways in which these components could be operationalised as key performance indicators in the evaluation of programmes.

INTRODUCTION

The war on poverty is South Africa's priority and challenge. A developmental approach has been adopted to address the problem. This approach is built around the concept of social development, which is based on the principle that social and economic development are interdependent and mutually reinforcing processes. Poverty alleviation programmes have been established in various government departments and civil society organisations in South Africa. Despite these efforts, poverty and inequality have worsened in recent years.

An overview of the literature suggests that poverty alleviation programmes internationally and in South Africa have generally focused on project-based interventions, with an emphasis on service delivery and economic development, particularly income-generation and employment-creation projects. The author thinks that given the context and nature of poverty in South Africa this approach is too limiting, especially since it is taking place within a neo-liberal macro-economic framework which is incompatible with development. Given these contradictions, it is argued that the social component is equally important as economic development in poverty alleviation. Ideas for practice are proposed on how achieve a knowledgeable, active and empowered civil society.

Social workers are involved in the implementation of poverty alleviation projects. This article will contribute towards extending their awareness that poverty alleviation takes place within far wider processes of social and economic transformation. Ideas suggested to address poverty and inequality will contribute to the development of practice skills and stimulate ideas for future research.

THE NATURE OF POVERTY: THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Poverty in South Africa is profoundly of a structural nature, emanating from the economic, political and social organisation of society (Wilson 1997:227). The structural barriers of apartheid have left a legacy of underdevelopment, poverty and inequality. The incidence of poverty coincides with the patterns of racial, gender and geographical discrimination and oppression that occurred in the country. Although poverty occurs in the whole population, Africans, women and children, and rural areas appear to have been the most affected. Kothari (1995:85) is of the opinion that oppression and poverty have been found in the global context to be part of a single phenomenon.

POLICY INITIATIVES

Many new policy initiatives have emerged in post-apartheid South Africa as instruments designed to correct past imbalances. In 1994 the Government of National Unity adopted the over-arching socio-economic policy of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (referred to as RDP) to confront and challenge poverty, inequality and injustice in South Africa. All subsequent policies have been based on the developmental approach of the RDP. This approach recognises that income poverty is only one aspect of structural poverty. The Minister of Welfare and Population Development (Hansard, 1997:3304), in adopting the definition of developmental social welfare, is quoted as saying: "This definition is important, not only because it has been accepted by the people of South Africa, but also because it provides us with a vision of the type of social change that is needed to address both the psychological wounds of apartheid and deal with the root causes of social problems. It helps us to address the problems that emanate from systems and structures. With this holistic approach and multipronged policy direction in social welfare, we are therefore, challenged to move away from the incremental, ad hoc, fragmented response of the needs of the people within the public sphere of provision."

Eade and Williams (cited in Eade, 1997:24) state that development is about women and men becoming empowered to bring about positive changes in their lives; about personal growth together with public action; about both the process and the outcome of challenging poverty, oppression and discrimination; and about the realisation of human potential through social and economic justice; above all, it is about the process of transforming lives and transforming societies.

Empowerment is central to development and should be the ultimate objective of all poverty-alleviation programmes. Shragge (1993:iii) defines empowerment as a process that involves changing power relations between individuals, groups and social institutions. At the same time, it is a process of personal change as individuals take action on their own behalf and then redefine their understanding of the world in which they live. Self-perception moves from victim to agent, as people are able to act in a political and social arena and pursue their own interests.

However, under pressure from international finance institutions and local businesses this policy was displaced by the neo-liberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution policy (referred to as GEAR). Unlike the RDP with its comprehensive developmental thrust, GEAR provided "...a familiar package of global orthodoxy: discipline in the fiscus and in monetary policy, increasing public and private investment, pursuing a stable exchange rate, reducing tariffs, and encouraging a strategy of export-led growth" (Munslow & Fitzgerald, 1997:42). The intention of these measures was to deliver higher rates of economic growth, which would lead to the creation of more jobs and, eventually, the eradication of poverty (Le Roux, 2001:214). To date this has not occurred. The critics of GEAR are of the view that it undermines the government's existing capacity to deal

with poverty and is incompatible with the developmental approach proposed in the RDP. It has come to be known as a homespun structural adjustment programme (Marais, 1997:6).

Simultaneously, in an effort to bring equity in living standards and equality of opportunity, legislation has become an instrument for social change. Examples of this are the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 and the Skills Development Act 97 of 1998.

POVERTY ALLEVIATION PROJECTS: FINANCIAL AND TECHNICAL FOCUS

Numerous poverty alleviation projects have been established in the various sectors. However, recent studies of these projects have shown that the emphasis of capacity building has been on economic activities and the development of technical skills. For example, assistance in grant writing and simple bookkeeping skills have taken precedence over social development. There has been a neglect of process goals (Everatt & Zulu, 2001:17; Ndwandwe, 2001:101). Botes and Van Rensburg (2000:46) hold a similar opinion that in many development projects the so-called 'hard' issues (technological, financial, physical and material) are perceived as being more important for the successful implementation of projects than the 'soft' issues (such as community involvement, decision-making procedures, the establishment of efficient social compacts, organisational development, capacity building and empowerment). Factors encouraging this situation are that donors (the state, private sector and international donors) have continued to support organisations for classically defined activities such as employment-creation and income-generation programmes. The primary focus on economic development in poverty alleviation programmes has been a worldwide trend (Eade, 1997:4; Fischer & Shragge, 2000:4).

One can conclude that the implementation of policy into service delivery is very narrow. This is contrary to development as envisaged in government policies and by Eade and Williams (1997), which was discussed earlier in the text. Thus the contribution that projects make to poverty alleviation is minimal: in keeping with remedial and maintenance functions of welfare (Ndwandwe, 2001:101; Pieterse, 2001:41). This evades tackling the structural barriers in society that perpetuate poverty. Capacity is not being developed to enable people to act in the political and social arena, and to change the power relations between individuals, groups and social institutions.

STATISTICS OF POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

The poverty alleviation projects have had little impact on the poverty profile of the country. The government's Income and Expenditure Survey 2000 has not been impressive. It concludes that years of earnest social effort and world-class economic policy management have not been effective. According to Statistics South Africa, for the majority of black South Africans the situation has worsened. The poorest 50% of people were even poorer in 2000 compared to the poorest 50% in 1995 (*Financial Mail*, 2002:24). Poverty still has a racial, gender and spatial dynamic. Africans remain the poorest population group. More women are poor and unemployed and generally female-headed households are poorer. Poverty is more serious in rural areas (Republic of South Africa, National Report, 2000).

Similarly, the problem of inequality has not been addressed. South Africa is an upper-middle-income country, but most households experience either outright poverty or are vulnerable to poverty (May, 1998:55). South Africa's Gini-coefficient (measure of inequality) is one of the highest in the world and has worsened in recent years. In 1995 it was 0,596 and has since risen to 0,635 in 2001 (Adelzadeh, 2003:26). Great poverty exists alongside extreme wealth. Certain social groups are still disproportionately represented among the lower status and are in lower-paid jobs.

This situation illustrates that poverty in South Africa is not about lack of resources, but their unavailability to all.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

It is important to question why poverty is worsening, despite all the efforts and energy being put into projects and programmes. The author will argue that the emphasis on financial issues in projects is insufficient by itself to confront and challenge inequality and poverty in South Africa. In fact, the present projects and programmes could contribute towards maintaining the status quo in South Africa.

It is important that there is financial and material gain from poverty-alleviation projects. This addresses the most vital and pressing needs of the poor. The psychology of poverty is such that forward planning is a luxury the poor cannot afford (Wilson & Ramphela, 1989:349). They have to experience tangible change. However, Ginsberg (1998:3) is of the opinion that job-creation and income-generation projects introduced in the different ministries in South Africa are survivalists and have small profit margins. The presenters must be careful that the projects are not just short-term and superficial relief. It is important that the poor do not become satisfied with these negligible gains and allow broader issues such as the unequal distribution of wealth to go unquestioned. For example, Shragge (1993:219) is of the opinion that a fairly large percentage of the highest income group derives financial gain from ownership of land, property, stocks and shares and other financial assets. Involvement in small-scale projects will not be able to get the poor to this level of involvement in the economy. Wilson and Ramphela (1989:21) argue that such initiatives can provide little more than isolated islands of hope in a wider sea of social and economic despair.

Furthermore, the macro-economic policy of GEAR undermines the success of small-scale projects. It exploits the poor and the unemployed in favour of attracting foreign direct investment (Coetzee, 2001:21; Pieterse, 2001:40). Valodia (2001:881) agrees that trade and industrial policy in the post-1994 period has very rapidly exposed the industrial sector to international competition. This has been cited in the Department of Social Development's Annual Report (Department of Social Development, 2002) as a major obstacle to the sustainability of projects. Project participants find it difficult to access markets and are faced with emerging competitors. Small enterprises are highly vulnerable to a flood of cheap imports. They are also faced with competition from the larger more powerful formal sector that has the means to mass produce goods at lower costs. Within this context projects are disadvantaged and doomed for failure.

In addition, income-generation and employment-creation projects could perpetuate the problem of poverty and inequality. They allow for the maintenance of a low-skilled workforce. There are limited opportunities for upward mobility and progress. The informal sector is also excluded from added benefits such as occupational pension schemes, which are ways of attaining a better life in the future. It can also be argued that small-scale enterprises lock people into the fragmented informal sector rather than enabling them to enter unionised job markets (Eade, 1997:103). This denies them the acquisition of competencies such as political awareness, skills in social analysis, strategies for collective bargaining and social action. All these skills are necessary to challenge poverty (Kothari, 1995:74).

Also, the process of delivery could be exclusive. Often programmes focus on delivery (hard issues) because of the need to show results quickly. Process matters (soft issues) are often compromised, as they often entail a slow and unpredictable process because of the complexities of communities. As a result, community participation in the planning and design of these projects is

often limited. Services are provided to groups that have already organised themselves, often around economic activities, and may therefore not represent 'the poorest of the poor' (Everatt & Zulu, 2001:13). Once again this latter group is disadvantaged, and poverty and inequality perpetuated.

In addition, there is a need for a balance of social empowerment and economic development because of the complexity of South African communities. In the majority of cases development introduces marginalised communities to limited scarce resources and opportunities. Botes and Van Rensburg (2000:47) caution that this often increases the likelihood of development as a divisive force and can create conflict in communities. This internal conflict saps their energy and prevents communities from uniting against the oppressive systems and structures. There has to be a concurrent focus on aspects such as community analysis, conflict prevention and conflict-resolution skills, if problems are to be avoided.

The above discussion illustrates that poverty alleviation projects cannot be isolated from the broader social, political and economic processes taking place. People need to be aware and understand the world in which they live. Interestingly, during the period between 1998-2000 and beyond there has been delivery and stagnation (Everatt & Zulu, 2001:4). This has occurred despite the worsening of poverty and inequality. Everatt and Zulu (2001:4) state that people are less engaged and warn of the danger of reverting to non-participative delivery. Therefore we have to ensure that this situation of passive acceptance does not persist and allow poverty to grow. Thus an active and socially empowered civil society is integral to the war on poverty. Eade (1997:16) sees this as imperative because civil and political rights tend to correlate broadly with equitable economic arrangements. There has to be a political agenda to challenge the inequality in the distribution of income and wealth. For this to happen social workers have to sharpen their skills in order to meet these challenges.

IDEAS FOR PRACTICE

The above discussion illustrates that new conceptions of social work roles are needed, given the complexity, growing persistence and geographical concentration of poverty in South Africa. There has to be a more holistic approach to dealing with the problem. The author will propose ideas on how to achieve a knowledgeable, active and socially empowered civil society.

Efforts should be made to ensure that people become aware of the wider socio-political and economic context in which they live. Income-generation and job-creation projects could be an entry point for awareness raising and social mobilisation of communities in addressing the problem. This will address the need for immediate relief, while at the same time ensuring that people understand the wider context in which they live. According to Eade (1997:103), the more successful projects are those that include elements of consciousness raising. Carroll and Minkler (2000:26) suggest that there should be a revival of Freireian teachings promoting conscientisation, as readiness for change is important. Conscientisation makes people aware of the roots of oppression and gives them the confidence to take action for the sake of their own liberation. Communities need to critically examine their situation and its root causes, generate common themes, identify shared resources and move towards a plan of action (Carroll & Minkler, 2000:26).

Conscientisation sets the basis for collective action. Earlier in the 1990s there were calls by African authors to use a radical approach to uproot poverty. In this approach it is crucial that structural changes are made to improve the welfare of people, with an emphasis on the desire of the disadvantaged to work collectively towards changing alienating conditions (Anderson & Wilson, 1994:77; Mwansa cited in Osie-Hwedie, 1993:23; Ntebe, 1994:42). Organisation is a

strategy that social workers can use to get people to work together collectively to challenge oppressive power systems and structures. Through organisation the poor can gain power in numbers.

Collective action should be used to achieve access to opportunities and entitlements. Together with this, community education should be an integral component of income-generation and employment-creation projects. Communities should be given information about the various policies and pieces of legislation that have been adopted to promote social change and how they can be used to the benefit of the poor.

The role of the social worker should expand beyond involvement in survivalist projects which sustain a low-skilled workforce with little possibility of upward mobility. Interventions should include empowering communities to pressurise authorities to ensure that they have access to good-quality employment and economic opportunities. This should include the development of local businesses and industries, fostering industrial retention of the local workforce, and skills training and job placement. Through involvement in these processes people will realise that they can take action on their own behalf. Through this involvement they will develop the confidence to act in the political and social arenas, which is necessary for social transformation.

Eade (1997:83) has suggested a list of aspects which he regards as important components for social empowerment when dealing with poverty. It brings together many of the ideas discussed within the text of this article:

- Increased collective and individual confidence in assessing and finding solutions to social and political problems;
- Increased participation in decision making, especially among those who were previously excluded;
- Increased ability to make the connections between day-to-day living conditions and the wider socio-political and economic context;
- Greater ability to organise in order to press the competent authorities for better living conditions or respect for civil rights;
- Better knowledge of other relevant organisations;
- Collective acquisition of specific skills together with increased political awareness and skills in social analysis;
- Better social relations within the community or organisation, and improved conflict-prevention and conflict-resolution skills;
- Higher self-esteem and an ability to challenge negative stereotypes;
- More awareness of each others' needs, and greater willingness to co-operate.

The author proposes that these aspects be incorporated into the objectives of poverty-alleviation projects. It is recommended that further research be undertaken to operationalise them into key performance indicators. They should be included, in addition to the economic 'hard' goals that are often listed in programme proposals and evaluations. Furthermore, research should also be encouraged to develop practice models and skills in order to achieve these objectives in a heterogeneous and complex South African society.

CONCLUSION

A war on poverty has been declared by the post-apartheid government. However, poverty and inequality have worsened in recent years, despite the efforts in addressing the problem. A developmental approach had been adopted to deal with the problem. However, the implementation has entailed small-scale poverty alleviation projects which have focused generally on financial and technical skills. It has been argued here that this focus in itself can be disempowering and maintain the status quo, since it is taking place within a neo-liberal macro-economic framework. An empowered, knowledgeable and active society is needed to challenge poverty and transform society. If the war on poverty is to be won it is recommended that practices be re-examined and that the social empowerment component be strengthened as it is just as important as economic development.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS 1994. **The reconstruction and development programme**. Johannesburg: Umanyano Publications.
- ADELZADEH, A. 2003. **Mail & Guardian**, 4 April, 26.
- ANDERSON, S.C. & WILSON, M.K. 1994. Empowerment and social work education and practice in South Africa. **Journal of Social Development in Africa**, 9(2):71-86.
- BOTES, L. & VAN RENSBURG, D. 2000. Community participation in development: nine plagues and twelve commandments. **Community Development Journal**, 35(1):41-58.
- BOLLENS, S. 2000. Community development in democratic South Africa. **Community Development Journal**, 35(2):167-180.
- CARROLL, J. & MINKLER, M. 2000. Freire's message for social workers: Looking back, looking ahead. **Journal of Community Practice**, 8(1):21-36.
- COETZEE, J.K. 2001. A micro-foundation for development thinking. In: COETZEE, J.K. & GRAAF, J. **Development Theory, Policy and Practice**. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT 2002. **Annual Report April 2001- March 2002**. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- DLAMINI, P.M. 1995. Inequality and underdevelopment: Issues for a social development curriculum. **Journal of Social Development in Africa**, 10(2):23-33.
- EADE, D. 1997. **Capacity-building an approach to people-centred development**. London: Oxfam Publications.
- EVERATT, D. & ZULU, S. 2001. Analysing rural development programmes in South Africa 1994-2000. **Development Update**, 3(4):1-38.
- FINANCIAL MAIL 2002. Current affairs. nerves a - jangle. **Financial Mail**, 13 December, 24-25.
- FISHER, R. & SHRAGGE, E. 2000. Challenging Community Organising: Facing the 21st Century. **Journal of Community Practice**, 8(3):1-19.
- GINSBERG, A. 1998. **South Africa's future from crisis to prosperity**. London: Macmillan Press.
- HANSARD, 1997. **Debates of National Assembly 19-21**. February. First Session. Parliament Government Printers, RSA.

- KOTHARI, R. 1995. **POVERTY: Human consciousness and the amnesia of development**. London: Zed Books Ltd.
- LE ROUX, P. 2001. The South African Economy. In: COETZEE, J.K.; GRAAFF, J.; HENDRICKS, F. (eds) **Development: Theory, Policy, And Practice**. Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa, 212-229.
- MARIAS, H. 1997. The RDP: Is there life after GEAR? **Development Update**, 1(1):1-19.
- MAY, J. 1998. Poverty and inequality in South Africa. **Indicator South Africa**, 15(2):53-58.
- MAYEKISO, M. 2002. Restore the Dream of 1994. **Mail & Guardian**, December 13-19, 25.
- MUNSLOW, H. & FITZGERALD, P. 1997. Search for a sustainable development strategy: The RDP and beyond in managing sustainable development. In: FITZGERALD, P. & MCLENNAN, A. (eds). **Managing sustainable development**. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- NDWANDWE, Z.E. 2001. **An Investigation of A Poverty Alleviation Service Delivery Model In the Durban Region (KwaZulu-Natal)**. Durban: University of Durban-Westville. (M thesis)
- NTEBE, A. 1994. Effective intervention roles of South African social workers in an appropriate, relevant and progressive social welfare model. **Journal of Social Development**, 9(1):41-50.
- OSEI-HWEDIE, K. 1993. The challenge of social work in South Africa: Starting the indigenisation process. **Journal of Social Development in Africa**, 8(1):19-30.
- PIETERSE, E. 2001. In praise of transgressions: Notes on institutional synergy and poverty reduction. **Development Update**, 3(4):39-69.
- REPORT SOUTH AFRICA 2000. National Report on Social Development 1995-2000: Final Draft, May 2000. Available: <http://www.polity.org.za/govdcs/reports/welfare/intro.html/>
- SHRAGGE, E. 1993. Community economic development: In Search of empowerment and alternatives. London: Black Rose Books Ltd.
- VALODIA, I. 2001. Economic policy and women's informal work in South Africa. **Development and Change**, 32 (5): 871-892.
- WHITMORE, E. & WILSON, M. 1997. Accompanying the process: social work and international development practice. **International Social Work**, 40:57-74.
- WILSON, F. 1997. South Africa: Poverty under duress. In: OYEN, E.; MILLER, S.M. & SAMAD, S. (eds) **Poverty a global review: Handbook on international poverty research**. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 227-247.
- WILSON, F. & RAMPHELE, M. 1989. **Uprooting poverty: The South African challenge**. Cape Town: David Philip Publishers.

Dr Neeta Gathiram is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Work at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa.