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EDITORIAL

FOSTERING TRIPARTITE PARTNERSHIPS IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN SOCIAL WORK TRAINING INSTITUTIONS AND PUBLIC-PRIVATE WELFARE SECTORS

The necessity of collaboration and partnership among key stakeholders in advancing the social work profession in South Africa is evident. Accordingly, the development of formal communication structures between social work training institutions and public-private welfare sectors is strongly encouraged. Initiatives such as joint task teams, working groups, or advisory committees should be established to facilitate streamlined collaboration and partnerships, thereby enhancing the design and delivery of social service programmes. The collaboration of all three key stakeholders is crucial to establishing an effective and efficient social welfare and social work system that responds appropriately to the contextual needs of South Africa. Strengthening and fostering the proposed tripartite collaboration is indispensable for advancing social work research and education, shaping and analysing social policy, and improving social work practice to maximise its societal impact. The tripartite alliance must engage in deliberate and unified efforts to foster a caring, inclusive, safe, economically stable and sustainable society. Each stakeholder within the alliance bears a significant responsibility for achieving this shared objective.

The current socio-economic and political issues plaguing South Africa and its citizens are among the most significant challenges exacerbating the long-standing triple threats of unemployment, poverty and inequality. Recent political developments, such as the establishment of the Government of National Unity (GNU), represent one of many factors contributing to instability and uncertainty. The country is still attempting to acclimatise, while many individuals face an uncertain future due to a general loss of confidence in government. Furthermore, numerous people and economic sectors have yet to recover from the after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Adding to these challenges are unprecedented weather patterns

that intensify eco-anxiety and eco-depression—some of the detrimental effects of climate change and global warming. Zeichner and Liston (2013) confirm that natural disasters lead to a range of unforeseen socio-economic consequences, spatial displacement and psychosocial effects, such as trauma, grief and bereavement. Sub-Saharan scholars, including Shokane (2019), and Machimbidza, Nyahunda and Makhubele (2022), argue that the role of social work is becoming increasingly significant in disaster management, prevention and response. Recent natural disasters, such as the KwaZulu-Natal floods of 2022 (KZN floods), highlighted the need for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary preparedness and responses, which included social work (Motloun & Mzinyane, 2023).

The declining economy and low economic growth are additional challenges that contribute to the rising crime statistics. Further compounding these issues is South Africa's low credit rating and the persistent failure of parastatals such as Transnet, South African Airways (SAA), South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), and Eskom to become financially self-reliant, sustainable and viable entities. These are just a few of South Africa's numerous woes, in addition to the widely reported corruption. As a result, the state is forced to borrow more money to provide the desperately needed services that enhance the wellbeing and social functioning of vulnerable populations.

Inevitably, the entire system of higher education, including academics, researchers and students, is affected by socio-economic, political, environmental and psychosocial issues. Therefore, it is crucial for social work academics to continuously engage in reflective teaching, constantly re-evaluating their teaching philosophy and periodically reviewing the Bachelor of Social Work content (Hubball, Pratt & Collins, 2005) in the context of evolving real-life challenges.

Evidently, the state cannot address the numerous and complex issues affecting society's members without support from non-profit organisations, academics and researchers. These inter-sectoral and intersecting challenges have prompted a clarion call to foster a tripartite partnership among the state, academia, and the private and non-profit social work and social welfare sectors. A key partner in this proposed alliance is the Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions (ASASWEI). ASASWEI identifies an opportunity to establish and strengthen this partnership, aligning with its vision to promote social work education, training and research, while enhancing social work practice in South Africa. Through collaboration with relevant stakeholders, ASASWEI seeks to advance psychosocial functioning for individuals, families, groups and communities.

In pursuing its vision, ASASWEI aims to facilitate collaboration and the exchange of information on social work education, training, research and practice among members and relevant networks, such as governmental and non-governmental organisations. Additionally, the goal is to promote the contribution of social work to social and economic development, as well as to the broader transformation of South African society, through contextually relevant research, theory and practice. Furthermore, ASASWEI endeavours to contribute to the development, implementation and analysis of social welfare and social work policies and programmes. Motloun and Mzinyane (2023) argue that social work education entails the praxis of preparing future professionals for the real-life challenges that confront humankind.

Therefore, we propose genuine and context-specific tripartite partnerships between the Department of Social Development (DSD) at both national and provincial levels, the NPO sector and ASASWEI.

Now more than ever, Departments of Social Work across all 19 South African universities and colleges offering the Bachelor of Social Work degree are positioned to provide education and training that is both globally competitive and locally relevant. These programmes aim to empower social work practitioners and students with the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to navigate and excel in an increasingly dynamic world. However, without collaboration with key stakeholders – such as the Department of Social Development (DSD) and the non-profit organisation (NPO) sector – this vision risks remaining unattainable.

In recent years ASASWEI has built a reputation for organising and hosting conferences, colloquiums, seminars and webinars to enhance the social work profession and highlight the contribution of research to new knowledge, as well as to advance theory and practice. However, ASASWEI cannot contribute effectively to the sector without a partnership with the DSD and the NPO sector. The state could play an enabling role by ensuring that national and provincial DSDs provide financial resources and support, sponsoring not only social work practitioners to attend continuous professional development opportunities, but also supporting ASASWEI in hosting conferences and seminars for knowledge exchange.

With financial support from the government, social work education institutions could engage in collaborative research efforts aimed at informing practice and, conversely, deriving insights from practice to guide research. Such tripartite collaborations have the potential to enhance social work practice, influence policy development, and improve social service delivery strategies and programmes. Public and private social welfare and social work agencies could also benefit from the academic expertise and innovations provided by ASASWEI. The value of partnership and collaboration among stakeholders was exemplified during the 2022 floods in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province. During this crisis, social work practitioners and academics jointly provided emergency relief, material assistance, trauma debriefing and psychological counselling to victims and their families (Ngcobo, Mzinyane & Zibane, 2023).

Over the past two decades, the NPO sector has faced the persistent threat of severe funding cuts. The consequences of such reductions are significant, potentially resulting in staff retrenchments and, consequently, restricting service users' access to their rights. Furthermore, funding constraints may hinder the training of student social service practitioners and compromise the employability of graduates. Recent data from Statistics South Africa (2024) indicate that the national unemployment rate increased from 32.9% in the first quarter of 2024 to 33.5% in the second quarter. Youth unemployment remains particularly concerning, with a rate of 45.5%, which includes unemployed graduates (Mseleku, 2024). This high level of graduate unemployment is closely linked to broader socio-economic challenges.

All 19 member of ASASWEI offering BSW degrees are significantly reliant on the NPO sector for student placements and work-integrated learning opportunities. These institutions depend on social service practitioners to provide supervision, support and mentoring for students. A robust partnership between the DSD and the NPO sector is essential to ensure the financial

sustainability of the latter, thereby enabling the employment of social work graduates upon completion of their studies. As Mseleku (2024) highlights, education plays a pivotal role in equipping individuals to sustain their livelihoods and contribute to the economic development of the nation.

Within the context of our call in this Editorial for collaboration and partnership among stakeholders to advance social work in South Africa and comparable international settings, the December issue of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* centres on three primary themes: mental health, families and specific research methodological approaches. Recognising that the readership of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* extends beyond South Africa and the social work profession, this issue, consistent with all editions of the Journal, features contributions from international authors, diverse contexts and related disciplines.

In the inaugural article addressing mental health, the limited literature on social workers' perspectives regarding the mental health challenges faced by children and adolescents in child and youth care centres prompted Candice Lee Jacobs and Maditobane Robert Lekganyane to conduct an exploratory-descriptive qualitative study in the Gauteng province, South Africa. The study explored social workers' insights into the general mental health challenges affecting children and adolescents, the wider implications of these challenges for others within the care centres, and the availability of resources to address mental health-related issues in these settings. The findings emphasised the necessity of partnerships between care centres and training institutions to provide targeted training for social workers, house parents and the general public.

The second article under the mental health theme, by Uwarren September and Marianne Strydom, explores the global shift in mental health policy and legislation towards deinstitutionalisation. The successful implementation of this shift relies on the presence of community-based organisations to support families and individuals with mental illnesses. However, the authors note a significant research gap regarding social workers' perspectives on the implementation of mental health policies and the challenges associated with deinstitutionalisation in South Africa. Using a qualitative approach, the study examines whether deinstitutionalisation presents a predicament for social workers and families. The authors conclude that existing legislation is superficial, unfamiliar to social workers and primarily patient-driven, rendering deinstitutionalisation an ineffective reintegration strategy. They recommend that policymakers re-evaluate the implications of this legislation and prioritise the development of community-based resources to facilitate effective deinstitutionalisation and provide comprehensive care for individuals with mental illnesses and their families.

The second main theme of this issue, focusing on families, is addressed in six articles. In the first article under this theme, Jan Masombuka and Rebecca Mmamoagi Skhosana investigate the knowledge and needs of parents whose children misuse substances. This qualitative study was conducted at ten service points of the Gauteng Department of Social Development in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, South Africa. The findings highlight a pressing need for parents to be better equipped and informed about substance misuse and effective ways to address it, enabling them to provide appropriate support to their children. Expanding on the

theme of families and substance misuse, Sumai Sumarni and Salman Darmawan examine the heightened risk of social ostracism faced by children growing up with drug-abusing parents. The authors develop a theory based on these children's experiences of social exclusion and identify its multifaceted impacts. Conducted in a fishing community in Makassar, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia, the study reveals that children experiencing neglect and stigma due to drug use involving both a mother and father face broader and more severe impacts of social exclusion compared to those where only one parent uses drugs.

Under the overarching theme of families in this issue, Thembelihle Vumokuhle Zondi and Nathaniel Phuti Kgadima argue that divorce disproportionately affects women, leading to a qualitative exploration of the challenges they face. Their study identifies issues such as strained communication, lone parenting and the lack of fathers' involvement in child-rearing as key concerns. Also contributing to the theme of families, Jenita Chiba and Leila Patel report on the outcomes of a pilot study of a cash-plus intervention, the *Sihleng'imizi* programme, implemented with child support grant (CSG) beneficiaries and their families in Soweto, South Africa. The study identified positive outcomes, including enhanced caregiver knowledge and skills, increased caregiver involvement in their children's education, improved financial literacy and greater access to social support. These findings indicate that the programme is both practical and feasible to implement.

In a further examination of family dynamics, Jean Luyt and Leslie Swartz investigate how socio-economic and cultural circumstances in South Africa influence decisions to place children for adoption, as well as attitudes towards biological families and communication between adoptive and biological families. Their qualitative study highlights significant challenges for adoptive families, including the sharing of information about biological families, fostering connections with the biological family's community and culture, managing communication with biological families and facilitating in-person contact.

The final article on this theme examines what Charles Simbarashe Gozho, Noel Garikai Muridzo, and Taruvinga Muzingili describe as "professional parenting," focusing on the experiences of caregivers managing delinquent children in Zimbabwe's residential care centres. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to analyse the data, the study highlights several challenges faced by caregivers, including excessive workloads, concerns about potential legal disputes, limited access to comprehensive information regarding the children's backgrounds, and the intricate dynamics of carer-child interactions.

The third main theme of this issue, focusing on distinct research methodologies, is dealt with in two articles. Agrippa Mabvira, Roshini Pillay and Poppy Masinga present a reflexive account of their use of photovoice in a qualitative doctoral research project aimed at exploring the acculturation experiences of 12 immigrant adolescent learners in South Africa. The authors contend that employing photovoice enables social workers to develop more culturally sensitive and effective interventions grounded in the authentic experiences of service users. In the final article of this issue, Simon Murote Kang'ethe employs an autoethnographic methodology, drawing on his publications from 2009 to 2023. He reflects on the paradoxes of selected cultural interventions in the fight against HIV. His findings reveal that culture has contributed to

combating HIV by promoting desirable behaviours, supporting the work of traditional healers and embracing the principles of *ubuntu*.

This editorial advocates for the establishment of a tripartite collaboration aimed at shaping social policies to ensure the allocation of adequate financial resources for frontline and grassroots social work practice and research. Such resources are critical for the development and implementation of evidence-based social service interventions. The DSD is strategically positioned to foster an enabling environment that facilitates impactful outcomes, benefiting not only the three key stakeholders but also the nation at large, particularly its most vulnerable populations. The proposed tripartite partnership is both necessary and overdue, and this editorial presents an urgent call to action for members of the alliance to contribute to the transformation of social work education, research and practice in South Africa. It is anticipated that the articles in this issue will advance the agenda for tripartite collaboration and strengthen the theory and practice of social work, not only within South Africa but also in broader contexts facing similar challenges.

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Lambert K Engelbrecht
Editor-in-Chief
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