

## **SOCIAL WORK: A SOCIAL PARTNER IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Like many other countries worldwide, South Africa has accepted the challenge to achieve the aim of the United Nations to alleviate poverty by half by the year 2015. Thin (2002:17) states that poverty is a clear indicator that an economic system is not working as well as it should. This view of poverty sees it as both a social issue and an economic phenomenon (Thin, 2002:23).

The expression of poverty in both social and economic contexts is reflected in the “two worlds” character of the South African economy, which Terreblanche (in Lombard, 2008:23) describes as follows:

One modern, smart, professional, efficient, and globally oriented; the other neglected, messy, unskilled, downtrodden, and thriving on crime and violence.

The “modern” and the “other” second, or social, economy is, as President Mbeki acknowledges, “without a connecting staircase” (Harsch in Lombard, 2008:23). The widening gap between the rich and the poor emphasises the most salient characteristic of the South African political economy, that is, inequality in terms of the distribution of wealth (Schoeman, 2001:323).

Although South Africa’s macro-economic policy, the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy (GEAR), has provided for an economic growth rate of around five percent per annum (RSA, Budget Speech, 2007), it has been criticised for not creating the job opportunities required to impact sufficiently on the level of unemployment in the country and thus on the redistribution of wealth for the course of development (Terreblanche, 2002). Without the economic growth rate over the last decade, government would not have been in such a favourable position to invest in social assistance as its “biggest poverty alleviation programme with the aim to achieve the goal of a better life for all” (Department of Social Development, 2006:2). There is no doubt that social grants alleviate poverty. However, in the context of a developmental state, the question is: how sustainable is this “better life for all”? Sen (2007:3, 4) argues that:

[w]e have every reason to want economic growth, not for its own sake, but, as Aristotle put it, “for the sake of something else”, to wit, the bettering of human lives. We have to look beyond economic advancement. This is where social development provides a fuller and more far-reaching perspective than economic development seen on its own can possibly provide ... if we do not pay adequate attention to social development, then the rewards of even very high rates of economic growth can be far less than they could have been with well aimed social policies and practices.

Thin (2002:67) argues that it is essential that planners come to judge the success of economies, not in the morally neutral terms of economic activity as measured by GDP, but in normative terms of how well they are contributing to quality of life, social justice and happiness. Economic activity is thus about income, as well as human and social development. Clearly there is a complex interrelationship between economic growth, employment, poverty and income distribution that policy-makers ought to take into account (Singh, 2000:17). Politics and economics are inextricably linked on both the domestic and international levels (Schoeman, 2001:314). This is currently true of the increased petrol price in South Africa, which is impacting directly on both the affordability of transport and the food prices, and is felt most

severely by the poor. These are the vulnerable members of the so-called “second”, “social” and “informal” economy, who are in dire need of both sustainable livelihoods and at the same time protection against their marginalisation from the mainstream economy. Social economy, according to Thin (2002:144), “refers to activities deemed productive... but typically informal sector, non-monetised, and/or small scale ...”.

The World Bank (1990, 2001, in Thin, 2002:18) holds that the economic priority in development should remain that of maximising the potential of the poor for increasing labour productivity, while social development includes in particular the objectives of the provision of economic opportunities for all and the reduction of poverty (United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), in Thin, 2002:18). From the perspective of integrated social and economic development, the creation of economic opportunities for the poor includes the provision of basic social services in health care, education, family planning, nutrition and primary education (Hall & Midgley, 2004:9) and social welfare services. Social services are fundamental to human and social development and underpin economic development.

The government’s rigorous attempt to provide the poor and vulnerable with income through social grants meant that it neglected its responsibility to, in addition, provide social services and integrated human, social and economic development. In 2006 the government acknowledged that the social assistance programme was not specifically designed with exit strategies for beneficiaries, other than a change in their living circumstances and income levels, and stated: “There is a lack of proactive and deliberate strategy to link social grant beneficiaries to opportunities for economic activity” and thus “the opportunity to enjoy the dignity of work” (Department of Social Development, 2006:2). The Department of Social Development (2006:2) announced that an investigation into the possibilities of creating opportunities for social grant beneficiaries and the unemployed to participate in economic activities should become a key focus, if government was to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015.

The social and economic nature of poverty commits many role players to reducing the widening gap between rich and poor. While job creation remains the ultimate goal and responsibility of government in collaboration with the business sector, in addressing poverty, the social partners have a challenging role to play in advocating for and facilitating the mainstreaming of the poor into society. A crucial social partner in this challenge is the social welfare sector, in particular, social work.

This paper explores the mandate of social work in this challenge and reports on the findings of an investigation into how social workers have accepted the challenge to broaden their understanding of social and economic issues in order to facilitate integrated socio-economic development opportunities for the most vulnerable people in South African communities through productive economic activities, community economic development (CED) and micro-enterprises.

### **Social work mandate**

Many poor people in South Africa remain trapped in the cycle of poverty and are therefore excluded from participation in mainstream economic activities. Social work is concerned primarily with the vulnerable and the poor, so is challenged to accept its share of responsibility in addressing inequality and poverty by promoting the rights of poor people to social and economic development.

The adoption of the White Paper for Social Welfare in 1997 and, in principle, a developmental social welfare policy for South Africa firmly mandated a role for social work in human, social and economic development. McKendrick (1987:41) predicted this role for social welfare:

Because the nature and structure of the welfare system can be a fundamental ingredient in the promotion and attainment of national development goals, a major issue is how the existing welfare system can be adapted, or redirected, to facilitate the national economic growth upon which the well-being of all South Africans will ultimately depend.

This redirection implies a commitment to approaches, strategies and interventions that contribute, not only to human and social development and economic development through income transfers, but also to productive and self-employment (Midgley 1996:16). This shift requires a holistic approach, as the Department of Social Development (2006:7) concurs: “A more holistic approach needs to be deployed that links social grants beneficiaries and the unemployed to poverty alleviation and economic activity”.

This challenge extends social work’s role beyond poverty alleviation into sustainable livelihoods and commits the social welfare sector to being a social partner in contributing to national social development goals. An understanding of the interrelatedness of the social and economic aspects of poverty underpins this role for social partners like social workers, especially in promoting social justice. Social work can embrace the link between economy and social justice through sustainable livelihoods, as is aptly encapsulated by Thin (2002:87): “If economics is seen as part of society, and as a way of looking at livelihoods in the broad sense, then prospects for social justice are better”.

A sustainable livelihood approach emphasises the right of poor people to development, and more so, their right to decide for themselves how they would like to address their poverty and become economically sustainable (Mehra, 1997). The United Nations Social Development Summit in Copenhagen (International Council on Social Welfare, 1995) heralded the fact that development must address the needs of the poorest of the poor and must include the poor, not only amongst the priority beneficiaries of development programmes, but also as full participants in the twin processes of socio-economic development design and delivery and political decision-making (United Nations, 1999:3). The livelihood approach acknowledges the fact that “the poor” are not “a homogeneous mass, nor are they always merely weak, passive recipients of government handouts” (Hall & Midgley, 2004:7). Lombard (2003:227) concurs that being poor does not mean that people do not have the will, hope and strength to initiate and/or actively participate in interventions that can improve their lives. The premise for social work and thus for this paper is that “social [and] not just economic development is central to the progress of humanity” (Sen, 2007:1). For the poor, on the other hand, opportunities for human and social development occur more frequently than access to economic opportunities (Mehra, 1997). Social work must extend its role beyond human and social development to engage in economic activities that facilitate economic opportunities. These could contribute to the economic development of the poor and vulnerable, not only for purposes of sustainable livelihoods but also for empowerment, enabling them to make choices that would include them in mainstream society (Mehra, 1997). The focus of this paper is on the role of social work and its contribution to creating and facilitating such economic development activities and opportunities.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research was conducted in the qualitative paradigm because the purpose of the study was to understand and describe the contribution of social workers to economic development from an

inside perspective (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:51). The research design for the study was an instrumental case study (Fouché, 2002:276) of social workers and organisations committed to and involved in economic development activities for the poor and the vulnerable in the so-called “second” or “social” economy.

The data-gathering methods included four one-to-one and one group (focus group) in-depth interviews. A semi-structured interview schedule was used for this purpose. All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. As “describing, classifying and interpreting are at the heart of qualitative data analysis and entail identifying salient themes, recurring ideas or language and patterns of belief” (De Vos, 2002:352), the author categorised the data and identified themes and sub-themes emerging from the data, which were written up in a text format.

The sample was purposive and was informed by the researcher’s judgement (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:166), based on the following criteria related to social workers:

- Social workers who implemented, supervised or managed social work interventions related to economic development activities;
- Social workers who engaged with client systems in at least one of the following economic activities:
  - Productive or self-employed economic activities
  - Micro-enterprises/income generating projects
  - Community Economic Development (CED);
- Social work interventions targeted at the vulnerable poor, and directed at one or more intervention levels, i.e. individual, family, community or organisational.

The sample included 9 social workers from the following organisations/enterprises:

- Five respondents (focus group) from a non-governmental child and family welfare organisation that provides social and developmental services across the broad spectrum of social service delivery in five provinces;
- One respondent from a development agency, a consultancy on socio-economic development involved in the identification of growth constraints in businesses, assessment of needs for growth and training, and the monitoring of the implementation of training;
- One respondent from a company that avails itself of opportunities for Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and invests in shares that contribute to cash distribution for poverty alleviation and business services;
- One respondent from a non-governmental welfare organisation providing social and developmental services for people with physical disabilities in the northern Gauteng province;
- One respondent from a well-established Art and Crafts Market/enterprise, a job-creation project under the auspices of a non-governmental welfare organisation in the Mpumalanga province that aims to create 300 or more job opportunities for entrepreneurs, and to revive and preserve certain aspects of South African cultures and their art and crafts. At the time of the research more than 150 people sold their art and craft work through this market.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The respondent group’s profile (Table 1) is presented with regard to the organisation, the employment capacity of the respondents, their years of experience in social work and their years

of experience as social workers in economic development activities. The following list of income-generating activities indicates the nature of the economic activities in which the respondents (social workers) and their organisations/enterprises were engaged at the time of the research. The research findings of the study are categorised and discussed under five themes and various sub-themes.

### Profile of respondents

All the respondents are trained social workers by profession and are involved in the profession as practitioners, managers or directors of their organisation/enterprise.

**TABLE 1  
 PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS**

<b>Organisation/ Enterprise</b>	<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Total years of experience in social work</b>	<b>Years of experience in economic development in relation to the total years of experience as social worker</b>
Child and family organisation	Manager social services	22	6 (of 22)
	Manager student supervision	29	4 (of 29)
	Senior social worker	12	3 (of 12)
	Social worker	2 years, 7 months	2 years, 7 months
	Social worker	1 year, 5 months	1 year, 5 months
Development and consultancy agency on socio- economic development	Director	22	10 (of 22)
BEE enterprise on cash distribu- tion for poverty alleviation and business services	Chief Executive Officer	35	10 (of 35)
Association for people with disability	Director	36	19 (of 36)
Arts and craft enterprise/market	Project Coordinator	20	11 (of 20)

### Economic development activities

The following income-generating projects were identified amongst the respondent organisations. While some of them are self-sustaining, the majority are still subsidised. However, all of them have a long-term vision of becoming self-sufficient as micro-enterprises:

- Sewing
- Bead work



- Needlework
- Welding and woodcraft
- Art work
- Wirework
- Glassware
- Baskets and other glassware
- Soft home furniture
- Spinning and weaving
- Knitting
- Screen printing
- Cultural fashions
- Crafts from recycled materials
- Pottery and ethnic crafts
- Juice making
- Cleaning products
- Clothing boutique
- Development craft project

## **Themes**

The following themes emerged from the research findings:

Theme 1: Reasons for linking social work with economic development

Theme 2: Social workers' capacity for economic activities

Theme 3: Process for economic development activities

Theme 4: The impact/potential impact of social work on economic development

Theme 5: Challenges for a paradigm shift to an economic focus

Theme 6: Lessons learnt.

### **Theme 1: Reasons for linking social work with economic development**

The overarching reason for respondents shifting to an economic development focus was to address poverty by means of strategies that would create work, secure an income for sustainable livelihoods, and curb the culture of dependency, supported by the strong belief that social workers have the passion and expertise to effect change and that the community relies on them to meet their developmental needs, as reflected in the following response:

*Massive poverty and the fact that there are no work opportunities ... I realised that people can create their own work ... if one can help them and create opportunities for them, they can create their own work ... I saw in the black communities the people have the talents, but they never thought that [these] could earn an income for them – so basically you only have to use something that people already have and then in turn they can teach those that do not have it.*

### **Theme 2: Social workers' capacity for economic activities**

Research findings indicated that the capacity and impetus of social workers to embark on economic activities starts with themselves. Social workers ought to have a clear vision for social work with an economic focus; utilise their inherent qualities, knowledge and skills; determine what they need in this regard; utilise training opportunities and resources and, most of all,

develop a business attitude towards their service delivery. These findings will be discussed as sub-themes.

### **Sub-theme 1: Vision and confidence**

Respondents agreed that the starting point is having a vision and a strong conviction that they can make a difference, as summarised by the following response:

*Like as a social worker ... you must believe in yourself and that you can make a difference in people's lives. And that is basically what social work is all about. We want to influence people's lives, move [them] from A to B. And nothing is impossible ... We are visionaries. ... if you believe that miracles can happen, you can strike water out of this wood ... and then you go for it, unflinchingly ... So everything I touch I believe that it has to turn into success, no matter what. But you work at it, sure. ... you research, you ... contact people, you network, you get out of that cocoon and go and seek knowledge and information through research. ... Be empowered ... So these are the motivating factors.*

### **Sub-theme 2: Knowledge and skills**

There was general consensus amongst respondents that social work provided the platform for venturing into economic activities on the basis of their understanding of broader social issues. Also unanimous was their agreement that they desperately needed "the language of economics". Although two respondents had been exposed to some basic economic training in their Social Work degrees and one respondent had encountered demography and human resource development at the honours degree level, the general view among the respondents could be summarised as the following:

*We went to university from a social sciences perspective ... we were not really ... taught business skills and economic skills ... it is something that you have to acquire while working in the field ... and economics is not our cup of tea ... it is a new skill ...*

The following responses reflect the extent to which social work training and experiences have prepared respondents to make the shift to an economic focus:

*... if you have been through this [social work] training you are in the best position to see where something must go...I do believe this with my whole heart...our training helps us to see and to see where to...sometimes we struggle with the what...*

*You had the vision, but the capacity was not there.*

Social work knowledge and skills that were specifically highlighted as very helpful included:

- Demography, "which helped me to view things from another angle";
- Human resource management training;
- Communication and interviewing skills;
- Research skills.

The respondents identified the following business and financial skills as crucial if social workers are to engage in economic development activities:

- Negotiation (particularly for economic resources)
- Correct meeting procedures and taking minutes
- Writing business plans
- Bookkeeping

- Budgeting skills
- Marketing skills
- Costing items
- Reading financial statements
- Utilising economic resources.

The respondents had acquired most of these skills through experience. They indicated that they did not know initially that they needed the skills and that it was only in retrospect that they were able to identify what they had had to learn along the way. Their learning was depicted as a lonely route of discovery, which was expressed as follows:

*In the beginning I really had nothing...it was through experience that I learnt. The only skills I had were the talents God gave me. ... I had to learn with time ...*

### **Sub-theme 3: Training**

Respondents agreed that training in economic knowledge and skills could be formal, such as university training, or semi-formal as in short courses. It could also take the form of informal training, including discussions at the supervision level. One respondent who had done a module in business management and entrepreneurship in his BSW undergraduate training indicated that he could understand the value of the module only when he started to practise as a social worker. Although he personally thought the modules were of value while he was studying, he indicated that “some of the students thought ... what’s wrong with this? How can we do business while we do social work? It was more of a personal thing”.

### **Sub-theme 4: Resources**

Respondents indicated that a lack of knowledge did not inhibit them from pressing forward to find solutions for challenges, an attitude which is clearly reflected in the following response: “if one did not know ... we don’t have to present ourselves as experts of everything – that is why we use our resources.” Resources can also lie within social workers themselves. In other words, they must acknowledge their own strengths when it comes to contributing, as well as their lesser strengths, so that they connect with the required resources.

Respondents emphasised the importance of knowing and utilising resources when building their own and the community’s capacity and empowerment levels. They indicated, however, that they first had to identify resources and understand how they could benefit from them before they could link up with those that were relevant. One respondent’s response summarises the general views very aptly:

*... so you can’t use resources unless you know what they are there for, you know what benefits there are ... through experience I recognised how you can be an advocate for people without knowing what you are supposed to be advocating – so we don’t really know legislation ourselves ... it is very, very important that we look at the legislation that relates to us.*

### **Sub-theme 5: Business mind and attitude**

Respondents indicated that developing a business mind and attitude requires social workers to account for their time and work in economic terms. They indicated that the knowledge and understanding facilitating a business attitude include the following: attaching economic value to time and productivity; understanding how their salaries are calculated; drawing up their own [personal] budget; costing and budgeting of projects, services and office facilities and observing



successful small and micro-enterprises. The relevance of a business attitude is emphasised in the words of one respondent:

*Attitude ... is basic, basic, basic ... the fear [of undertaking something new] ... it's an attitude.*

### **Theme 3: Process for economic development activities**

Respondents indicated that there is no blueprint for the development of economic development activities. However, they did indicate what they regarded as some critical components in the process. These will be discussed next as sub-themes. The respondents indicated that these components do not apply in any particular sequence of design or implementation.

#### **Sub-theme 3.1: Starting point**

Respondents agreed that the actual starting point for community economic development activities is difficult to define, because a number of things have to be taking place simultaneously. One respondent expressed this difficulty as follows:

*In our project the students kept asking me [student supervisor] what must we do now and I said "I don't know – walk in the dark and find your own way" ... but you have to have some kind of market ... some product in mind and have to have some training. And then everything must develop simultaneously. And that's what is making it so difficult. I think there can be several starting points ...*

#### **Sub-theme 3.2: Engagement**

Respondents indicated that engagement in economic activities can be initiated by both the community and the social worker/agency. Whichever of these holds true, the engagement should be driven by the people's need, as they will ultimately be the beneficiaries of the development. This is indicated in the following response:

*... with ... [the arts and craft market] we had the idea of the facility and then we went to search for the people to bring them to the facility. We first saw the need. The people are there, but they did not have work ... [They have the skills] and we had the vision...*

The respondents indicated that their outreach occurred along a project route; this could be either (1) a traditional community development initiative, such as literacy training, with the vision of later expanding it into community economic development (CED) projects, or (2) a business venture from the outset, such as the art and crafts market. Respondents agreed that a community project with an economic focus from the outset is approached differently. Specific criteria are applied for selecting participants for a particular project. The following quotation makes the reason clear: "We test them before they can start sewing, because we are already in a contract and we need somebody that can sew."

However, even a project like the arts and crafts market/enterprise, with a purely economic basis, could best achieve its goals by linking up with existing human and economic development programmes, as described in the following response: "by networking you talk to people then they tell you about somebody else ... then you have a whole data base of all the people ... [I linked up with] Open Hands which started as a feeding scheme and then initiated workshops ... in this way we made contact with people living in the townships who were unemployed but who had already started with handwork training ... we found an artist, 3 bead workers, a few people that could do needlework and a few people that could spin and weave".

Respondents indicated that, although there is a selection process for people engaging in economic development projects, in which production demands specialised skills, it does not exclude taking in learners with the potential to fit into the framework of the specific project. Teaching people to iron and package the completed garments is a case in point. However, at a lower level, the focus of engaging someone is still on a particular skills level, as demonstrated in the following quote: *“If they are not that good, they can still do little things like sewing on buttons and learn from that. But they must have the skills before we can involve them.”*

### **Sub-theme 3.3: Management**

Respondents indicated various levels of management of the economic development projects. These are referred to by different names, such as boards of trustees or management committees. These structures for the most part include volunteers representing various sectors in the wider community. Research findings indicated that a factor common to all the businesses/projects was an operational or managing committee consisting of representatives from the entrepreneurs or project participants overseeing the day-to-day running of the project. A high regard for operational committees was expressed as follows: *“There is usually a committee. It seems as if our communities will not work with any project if there is not a committee from the community.”* Respondents pointed out the importance of empowering these management structures for their task, for example, with the skills required for drafting and managing a budget. This finding underlines the importance of involving the poor and vulnerable in their own development. Wilson (1996:617) says, in this regard: *“[I]f it is truly to empower people, [we] must build community from the inside out – i.e. from the individual’s realisation of self-efficacy and interconnectedness with the larger community”*.

### **Sub-theme 3.4: Transforming CED into a business/micro enterprise**

Respondents indicated that the development of community economic development projects into micro-enterprises or individual or family businesses negatively affects those who are left behind in the project. The respondents indicated that the options must be planned for well in advance, that is, in the planning phase of CED projects, to ensure a win-win situation for all beneficiaries. The impact of training and then losing experience is evident in the following response:

*With the beads, what happens ... one woman got trained and she trained a lot of people and after some of the people had been trained, they left. And that was a problem for her. She said to me: “I’m willing to train and I want to do something with this project, but it’s really sad for me to see the people leave”. And now the beads people are not willing to train people. The people who got trained, they got new jobs ... and now the project stands still because all the people that were trained left. ... what I’m saying is if you build a project to become a business, the whole project will move out. You will have to start a new project. You can’t start another beading project because you will have to find your own market again.*

### **Sub theme 3.5: Training needs**

Respondents indicated that training needs are determined by the phase of the project and should be on a basic level, as so many people have been disadvantaged by apartheid and have low literacy levels, or none at all. Training is required not only in business and finance skills, in crafts or quality control, but also in human skills like basic or computer literacy. Businesses, government and training institutions all play an important role in assisting entrepreneurs in obtaining these skills. The interrelatedness between human and economic development manifests clearly in this finding.

### **Sub-theme 3.6: Finances and sustainability**

Start-up capital for the businesses/projects ranged from loans and donations to rental for stalls. Respondents indicated that accessing loans for micro-enterprises was difficult. One respondent argued that, while the Department of Social Development is willing to spend millions on social grants and poverty alleviation, they will not give a loan of R50 000 as start-up capital via her development agency. She interpreted this action as follows:

*... the policy is - help the poor, but they don't look at what the poor need. [They] need hard and soft skills, of course. But they also need R5 000. Why give people R100 000 when they never learnt to pay back R1 000? ... When I link up with them and show them what works and what doesn't work, and what I have learnt which they haven't learnt, ... acceptance is very, very difficult and the easy way of not accepting it is to move away from me. And they do so effectively because they have the money, they have the purse. I don't have the purse so what will they benefit from me – just this one person talking this nonsense, they can simply just exclude them.*

While respondents regarded finance as important, they did not see it as the only yardstick for sustainability. They agreed that projects do not always need an excessive sum as start-up capital in order to be successful. The following quote summarises respondents' views:

*... in sustainability ... financial stability is one of the criteria. ... money is crucial. All the time it will remain a constant in whatever you do ... [however] money is not the key thing. We need money, but when you start, don't focus too much on money. Focus ... on the sacrifices, what you can bring to the table ... labour, your ideas, ... and all things will unfold ... it's sweat equity ... what you bring in, non-financial contributions, which if you can translate ..... into cash, they are more than what we had.*

Respondents indicated that both money and other incentives played a role in the sustainability of economic development activities. As far as beneficiaries were concerned, incentives involving money and productivity included the following:

- “Drop-in” projects for which participants can learn a skill (such as bead work), produce items and earn R30 to take home – all on the same day;
- Payment is attached to productivity based on prior agreed outputs;
- Productivity as a determining factor for earning a position in a business/project: “you see the contract is ... you better be productive, if you are not productive ... we will give it [kiln for glassware crafts] to somebody else ... we [create] a business”.
- Cash incentives should be provided for specific categories in the business at the art and crafts market. Examples would be: stalls which are always open during the day, or which are clean and neat; wearing traditional clothes [for tourists]; and making the most progress in a particular month or during the year.

Other incentives contributing to sustainability are intrinsic to human and social capital, and include the following:

- Focus is on entrepreneurs'/participants' needs and strengths;
- Entrepreneurs/participants
  - take ownership for own development and growth;
  - are involved in the planning from the start;

- are involved in criteria for selection of entrepreneurs/project participants;
  - are represented by an operational committee;
  - take responsibility for taking care of the facilities and equipment;
  - participate in drawing up a constitution, and policies such as a code of conduct or disciplinary procedures;
  - Leadership and stability (including social worker);
- Involvement and buy-in of all sectors of the larger community.  
(Little Elephant Business Plan, 2004)

### **Sub-theme 3.7: Product and market**

Respondents indicated that the product cannot be separated from the market, because a product can sell only if there is a market. The importance of research and planning in determining the product was emphasised as follows:

*South African curios are dying ... [we have to] start stimulating our own ... [we said] there has to still be Ndebele women, especially the older women, who can still do bead work. Why do we not trace them and start from there? This is how the whole idea [arts and craft market] came about ... from 5 women who struggled to get their products sold ... you really have to see whether there is a market for the thing ... we have also discovered that there are certain things at the market that sell and others do not sell, and the things that sell, they make a lot of because the people like it ... your market research is important.*

Finding the market is closely linked to where the products are sold. Respondents agreed that the greatest sales attraction is the people (artists, crafters) themselves on the spot where the product is made. One respondent shared her experience in this regard: “*it is what I experience ... it's like people start to look differently [where they work]... they see the people, they experience it and they buy ... they attach a value to it.*”

### **Sub-theme 3.8: Marketing**

Respondents indicated a dual marketing focus: (1) the products/crafts and (2) the organisation or business. They agreed that the people (artists, crafters) themselves are the best marketers for their products. Marketing projects is thus, in the words of one respondent “*a joint effort between us ... and if we've done marketing for the project, we take those people with us to the exhibitions and the shows ... it [the product] is [then] really about somebody. It gets a face ... [and] makes it much more persona*”.

Motivated by the reduced government subsidy, respondents agreed that they have to market the organisations hosting the economic activities. One respondent indicated that

*...we took pictures of all our projects ... and if we go somewhere we have an exhibition ... and it has a huge impact ... you give it a face. ... you also utilise your local media – involve the newspaper.*

## **Theme 4: The potential impact of social work on economic development**

Respondents had mixed views on whether social work is making an economic impact on society. Respondents' views ranged from direct to indirect impact. At the same time, the impact of social grants was weighed against that of income-generating projects.

One respondent assessed the direct impact of social work on economic development as follows:

*Many people who lived in squatter camps and were unemployed, often for several years, now have a new dignity and self-esteem. Five of the entrepreneurs at the arts and crafts market have had the opportunity to travel overseas as a result of the project. If one takes into consideration that each of the people selling their crafts through the project has a family, then one realises just how many people's lives are being impacted by the project (Little Elephant/Ndlovu Encane Art and Craft Market Business Plan, 2004).*

Another respondent indicated the indirect impact of social work on economic development through human and social development in the following words:

*If a person is unhappy, it impacts on the economy ... if you have personal problems ... illness ... in the end you do not do the work that you are supposed to do or you do not even get to the work because it impacts on your quality of life.*

A respondent summarised the impact of social grants on the economy:

*[the contribution is ]... very small, ... financially it doesn't really make a big enough impact at this stage ... To put it in a broad sense, when I go into a community after three years I want to see that the community looks better economically wise. And I think the income-generating projects ... that we have in the communities isn't making a big enough change. I don't think everybody will like what I say, but social grants do. When I look at schools - and I remember what a school in Soshanguve or even Mamelodi looked like four years ago before child care grants really hit the ground - and I go there now I see better dressed children, I see better fed children, I see vegetable gardens in schools 'cause there's money going around. And some of that money comes from grants and we mustn't underestimate that.*

The following response shows clearly that the approach and attitude of social workers to economic development affects their views on whether or not social work contributes to economic development:

*I was looking at our [child and welfare organisation] statistics... last year we reached 2 689 [people] through income-generating projects ... and that's about one half percent of the people ... out of 65 6430. ... There is a perception ... [that] old age homes can generate money, crèches can but social workers can't, social work posts can't generate money. The whole profession of social work is seen as something you pay out that you don't get back - that's the posts, what to say about the jobs or projects that they do? ... somewhere we're not succeeding to say that because from my post the impact [on economic development] is there, it can be linked to me as a social worker. I think we measure it in financial terms, we don't measure it in value, value for a person or value that you can empower him ... you don't see that result [which is there].*

### **Theme 5: Challenges of a paradigm shift to an economic focus**

Findings indicated that a paradigm shift to an economic focus does not imply an abandonment of traditional social work; it is rather about finding a balance. It is also about challenging the focus on money within the traditional paradigm. This would be seen in terms of creating dependence versus independence, and of approaching traditional social work from the perspective of strengths and development with the vision of linking human, social and economic development (Midgley, 1996). Furthermore, it is about recognising the obstacles that hinder the shift. Finally,



and most important, it is about “me, the social worker, and whether I believe I can make a difference”. The following sub-themes emerged from this.

### **Sub-theme 5.1: Traditional social work**

It is unarguable that “casework will always be with us”. However, this reality does not mean that traditional social work cannot be approached in a different way from the developmental approach, that is, driven by the vision to link human, social and economic development. A premise as point of departure is to remember that “[m]any of our cases are poor ... with other problems ... poverty is the foundation of these things [other social problems] ... [it] leads to stress and perhaps clients should be evaluated in this way ... it is a new way to think about it.”

The following response dispels any doubt as to whether social workers have the capacity to impact on economic development:

*The saying goes that you cannot teach an old dog new tricks, but Buscaglia said that is an insult even to an old dog. ... I learnt all these tricks which I never thought I would learn ... social workers are incredible ... they are confronted with changes all the time ... you think you cannot take another thing ... but then you do so. I believe that social workers can be taught. It has to do with in-service training and if they can start at university and implement it there, so much the better. But for those who are in the profession it is definitely possible.*

### **Sub-theme 5.2: Obstacles**

Respondents indicated that the daily obstacles encountered by social workers are legitimate reasons for not being committed to pursuing any new or creative strategies for sustainable livelihoods for the poor. Reasons include:

- lack of time;
- being overworked;
- poor working conditions;
- low salaries;
- being a “jack of all trades” “with regard to community work and statutory work in the name of integrated services”.

One respondent described their dual responsibility as inhumane:

*How can one social worker attend to 100 cases ... and then you still have community projects to do because it is these projects that count at the Department [of Social Development]. ... we [social workers] are forced through the government’s policy ... the more you do, the more they want us to do. They do not subsidise our projects. We need to raise funds ourselves ... it is so unreasonable because they threaten you that you will lose your subsidy. You try and prioritise but everything is important ... social workers are on the edge of collapsing... if it is not an absolute calling I am not sure what you do in social work ... I have an idea our social workers can take their case work away but that community work ... it keeps them alive.*

### **Sub-theme 5.3: Choice or support**

Respondents questioned whether social workers really have a choice about making the paradigm shift to economic development activities, or whether it is rather a matter of getting the support to overcome the fears and difficulties of engaging in economic development activities. This following response indicates the ambiguity surrounding this issue:

*Have social workers got the luxury to choose or should we force social workers in this direction ... will that be setting them up for failure if it is not their interest? ...if we [social workers] get enough backing and support to do it, one can say “yes” go into this. If it is a crisis ... our workers are often confronted with things that you do not have a choice ... it is the situation and you have to deal with it.*

#### **Sub-theme 5.4: Self-perceptions by social workers**

Respondents indicated that the decision to make a shift in practice to include economic development activities is embedded in the vision of addressing poverty and unemployment. This, in turn, is rooted within social workers' attitudes and belief in themselves and their openness to learn and to grow. Respondents clearly projected this viewpoint:

*The challenge is on us. We are not assertive enough. ... maybe it's a social work mentality ... we are not aggressive, we are not saying “this is my contribution ... [you are] underrating yourself ... wake up! Be confident!” ... We are not doing it as social workers ... we have done a lot for this country. Maybe we should go for assertiveness training ourselves.*

Respondents clearly indicated that behind their efforts at engagement in economic development activities lies great perseverance, inspired by the driving force of a clear vision that economic development activities through social work are achievable. The challenge is clearly reflected in the following response:

*People should have no illusions ... it is not easy ... [but] the satisfaction it gives you [because] you are making a difference ... you can affect so many people's lives ... case work limits the amount of people you can [reach] as well as what you can achieve.*

#### **Sub-theme 5.5: Facilitate transparent communication**

Respondents indicated that transparent communication amongst all stakeholders of economic activities serves various purposes, such as providing information, preventing conflict and ensuring open agendas. The following response summarises the importance of transparent communication:

*... people want information ... If, right at the beginning, you inform people about what is going on ... it's preventative. You anticipate conflicts in future ... work on those conflicts before you get to them. So, I'll say the conflicts are self-made, are man-made, and they can be prevented ... inform people [on] ... financial statements, every little cent, where it goes, how much we have in the bank. ...[T]his is a new democracy. We must practise it at every level. ... No conflicts, no hidden agendas. Everything is on the table. ... They are so happy because you are transparent. And they have it on paper, you can't lie. So I am saying, to prevent conflict, be transparent ... no hidden agendas ... inform people in advance. And have open discussions ... let them ask questions.*

#### **Sub-theme 5.6: Hand-outs and social grants**

Research findings revealed that taking a stand against hand-outs and social grants to address poverty does not negate the value that grants have in adding value to human lives in times of crisis. It is not a matter of one or the other, but of how soon the level of a sustainable income can be achieved. Within the socio-developmental context, it means planning for exit levels that lead to sustainable livelihoods and integration of the poor into mainstream society.

One respondent indicated that social workers undermine their own best intentions when moving clients or projects towards financial independence. In facilitating the right to independence, they

find themselves feeding the culture of dependence by providing handouts without a structured exit plan:

*...the people involved with projects are very wanting to be given all the time, all the time, because they know that there is a source of income from somebody – be it the government or private.*

### **Sub-theme 5.7: Disengagement**

Respondents indicated that there is no single rule or guideline as to when the social worker should disengage from CED projects or micro-enterprises, if at all. Respondents indicated that a sustainability problem is created if the social worker leaves the project and it becomes independent too soon. A guideline, according to the respondents, is the level of success achieved. When the project has attained success, the role of the social worker decreases as the project continues. However, if the project is struggling, a greater and longer input is required. On the other hand, one respondent asked:

*Do you have to disengage? I would say “not necessarily” ... I’m saying “let’s be flexible” ... I don’t know ... with students, they ... have to disengage. That is a practical reality. But if you live in the same community ... you are the social worker at the local authority, you live there and ... you are the champion, ... [then] be there as a facilitator ... [you]initiated it. I facilitated it ... I’m the champion. And to ensure that it works properly, I imposed my championship ... because there are so many things involved here, so many dynamics. And I felt that if I don’t run this thing, it’s going to go flat ...*

Some respondents viewed disengagement as a critical and responsible step that has to be carefully planned:

*... you manoeuvre your way, which is not manipulation. ... it’s leadership. ... it is an imposition. ... At no stage will I say I am going to disengage until I believe that there is an understudy that I have empowered that that person can take over ... and empowerment is not forever, it has time frames. So you must ensure [when you disengage] ... who is taking over from you. How empowered is that person? Plan for it ... and sometimes the community might love you to pieces and say “you are going nowhere” ... but on their terms ... and [because it is] earned.*

### **Theme 6: Lessons learnt**

Respondents outlined the following lessons garnered from their experiences with productive economic strategies and activities:

*... it took a champion. ... there must be a champion and willing partners to start this dream together and if that commitment can be found ... [social workers must] see themselves as ... a champion who, again, [it is] very, very crucial, it should be internalised, that what you are here for is to empower people ... that’s why the champion must also have the passion to empower with whom she would be working. Send them for training.*

- Don’t lose your vision to make a difference.
- The process starts with us taking the risk. In our profession we are not taught to take a risk and that is why many of them can’t start. So the risk taking is a business challenge which people who have a business attitude will take all the time.
- Have perseverance, try again and never give up.

- Managing my own resources is a huge lesson. Understand how they come ... being aware and if you are not aware, how will you manage them?
- Be open for change ... for new ideas ... you should never stop learning ... you never know everything and you can gain from other people's ideas.
- If I look back I know that nothing is impossible.

## DISCUSSION

- Social workers who made the shift to seek and implement productive economic strategies to address poverty have a clear commitment, vision and belief that they can make a difference. It is these attributes which seem to provide the energy and capacity to persevere despite the many obstacles and challenges they face in their venture.
- It has been demonstrated in this study that the NGO sector has clearly taken up its role as social partner in contributing to economic development. This is in line with Mehra's (1997:137) observation that "many NGOs have demonstrated an interest not only in improving people's economic status and well-being but also in empowering the people themselves to obtain improvements in their lives".
- Social workers should not hesitate to be "champions" in the community, to initiate the processes of productive economic strategies and, at the same time, seek out other champions within the projects or community who can take up leadership roles. Leadership must come from the beneficiaries and empowerment opportunities must be sought and provided to facilitate the best leadership in economic development activities.
- The challenge for social workers is to shift from a purely social science perspective to a business-oriented attitude and approach towards social service delivery. This means that social workers have to acquire financial and business skills. This could be achieved, for example, if they were to undertake their own cost analyses and budgeting for their unit of service delivery within the organisation. In applying such knowledge and skills in their personal lives and immediate work environment, social workers would be in a better position to transfer the skills to communities. Social workers should be familiar with the legislation, policies and resources applicable to socio-economic development and should continuously keep themselves updated. In addition, they should link with information networks that provide constant empowering opportunities for the poor and the vulnerable. Prigoff (2000:2) maintains that, if they are to provide leadership on economic issues, social workers need: skills for organising and political action; knowledge of the economic profile of the communities in which they work; and knowledge of the tools, methods and limitations of economic theory and practice.
- In working towards sustainable livelihoods for the poor, social work should seek strategies to counteract the culture of dependence by advocating for and facilitating processes for loans for long-term development, as well as grants for immediate relief. Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, sees micro-credit as a way out of poverty (Chigudu, 2003:8). Kollapen, Chairperson of the SA Human Rights Commission (HRC), supports Yunus in his campaigns to address the lack of access to loans by the poor (Kollapen, 2003:15). He states that it has been proven in Bangladesh that, when banks are geared towards very small loans, the repayment rate is much higher than that for large loans. With reference to South Africa, he comments: "Yet the assumption in this country is the opposite" (Kollapen, 2003:15). Thin (2002:79) adds that long-term prospects for sustainable credit are damaged "by perpetuating the myth that poor people cannot repay loans at fair commercial interest rates".

- Community development programmes and projects seem to constitute an entry level for social workers to engage in economic development activities. The central argument is that “if CED is to become a strategy for social change, it will have to build on community organisation practice and integrate economic development into the rich traditions of community development” (Shrage, 1997:1). The human development context which allows social workers to engage in economic development through the practice of community development, however, must not be overlooked. Human development is a key focus of social service delivery. In turn, it is vital to economic development (Galor & Moav, 2004; Midgley, 1995:59). If individual change is the building-block for community and social change and “empowerment is community economic development from the inside out” (Wilson, 1996:618), investment in people, and hence human development, creates opportunities to link individuals with economic development activities. All social service delivery should, therefore, have a planned focus that links human and social development with economic development where client systems are in need of income.
- Community economic development projects should use selection criteria when engaging the appropriate talents and skills required for a CED project. There should be clear guidelines for different levels of skills and a training plan in place to provide empowerment opportunities for entrepreneurs/participants to facilitate progress to advanced skills levels. The beneficiaries’ needs, along with the context of their lives and environments, should be taken into consideration when project planning is carried out as, for example, in the case of the child and family organisation’s “drop-in” project for women who live on the streets and/or in shelters. Up-front payment for products is an appropriate strategy for women to earn a daily allowance for work done that day. This strategy provides daily food and ensures that the women do not resort to the streets to earn an “income” from prostitution.
- Non-governmental welfare organisations should make a “mind” shift in the application and administration of grant money, as in the case of the drop-in project just described. A grant could be used as start-up capital for materials and/or payment of a daily allowance and, as the products sell, the money could be reinvested in community economic development initiatives, expanded to other projects or used to cover the operational costs of the organisation/enterprise. Social workers should lobby donors about utilising grant money for loan purposes. This would allow participants in economic development activities to borrow money for production and then repay it in terms of a contract agreement. This would allow them to experience the empowerment of self-reliance, ownership and responsibility. Research indicates that it is a misconception that poor people cannot repay their loans (Larance, 2001). The Department of Social Development should be challenged, specifically when it comes to financial investment in sustainable livelihoods. If beneficiaries are on social assistance, government should allow them to earn an income beyond the means-test level until income levels have stabilised through their own productive employment efforts (Raheim, 1996). At the same time, non-governmental welfare organisations are challenged to find productive strategies for encouraging capital building as opposed to the present heavy reliance on government subsidies and donor money.
- The strategies, activities and actions involved in facilitating a process of community economic development and the development of micro-enterprises are specific. There are several starting points for such a process, provided that the process itself is matched with a number of considerations: the talents and skills of the beneficiaries; the product and the market; specific training aimed at raising the levels of human and economic empowerment;



and securing beneficiaries' involvement in the marketing and selling of their products and in managing their own affairs. Open communication on every aspect of the process leading to the establishment of the intended micro-enterprise should be a matter of principle. Policy guidelines for a code of conduct should be drawn up in collaboration with participants and should be strictly implemented in order to facilitate and establish good practice principles. In particular, participants should be prepared for the disengagement of individuals who break away from a CED or micro-enterprise to start their own business and proactively plan for how such breakaway micro-enterprises could network or form a cooperative and create bigger markets. Newly formed micro-enterprises should therefore not prevent product growth out of fear of shared markets and hence smaller incomes, but should rather strategise around creating better opportunities for higher income through profit-sharing. Transparent communication on every aspect of the process is obviously vital.

- The impact of social work on economic development ranges from direct to indirect, which influences social workers' views on the role of social work in economic development. These views differ regarding their involvement in economic development activities (McKinlay, 2004). While many social workers recognise the need for engagement in economic development activities, they experience a great deal of uncertainty as to how social work can make an effective contribution to economic development. In 1996 Midgley wrote that, on the one hand, social workers doubt that the profession has the experience and skills to introduce programmes compatible with economic development activities. On the other hand, many social workers believe that social work is best suited to working with individual clients and that wider economic development issues are beyond the profession's perspective (Midgley, 1996:17). These concerns, Midgley (1996:17) argued, were "legitimate concerns and it is not surprising that most social workers are uneasy about becoming involved in a field in which they have little expertise or experience". Twelve years later these concerns can be challenged in terms of their "legitimacy", especially in view of social work's developmental practice framework, which encourages a shift to sustainable livelihoods and tangible examples of achievements in this regard. Midgley (1996:16) confirms that a developmental approach "can ensure their [the poor and vulnerable] integration into society - as productive citizens who not only contribute to their own well-being but also to the development of the community".

## CONCLUSION

The research study indicated that social work has made inroads into contributing to economic development and hence in integrating human, social and economic development of the poor and the vulnerable. The research findings are a response to Hall and Midgley's (2004) call to find more innovative strategies to address poverty with the aim of creating more sustainable livelihoods, but, at the same time, not rejecting all past practices.

There are clearly challenges for social workers who want to embark on, and engage in, economic development activities. Besides having the vision and right attitude to engage in sustainable livelihood practice through economic development activities, social workers are challenged to build their capacity in business management, and increase their entrepreneurial, financing and marketing skills (Prigoff, 2000:xi). Capacity building also includes understanding and challenging South Africa's macro-economic policy framework, i.e. the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR) and the legislation, policies and resources that are intended to transform economic growth into economic development that embraces the majority of the population (Schoeman, 2001:300). Prigoff (2000:xi) maintains that current economic issues are critical for all people in all nations, and that it is crucial for social workers

to understand these issues. She argues that the global economy has already altered human social structures in various irreversible ways, concomitantly altering social conditions.

The unique personal sacrifices and professional challenges social workers face when engaging in economic development activities emphasise the highly specialised attitude, vision, knowledge, competencies and skills required in this area of social work. Clearly not all social workers would wish, or have the capacity, to facilitate change in the lives of the vulnerable and the poor through economic development approaches and strategies. This conclusion is no different from that of the current practice reality that social workers choose the fields in which they want to engage and specialise, for example, mental health, disability or substance abuse. Not all social workers have the commitment and capacity to work in all specialised fields. The author therefore concludes that the engagement of social work in economic development should be recognised as a specialised field. This would not only be in line with the shift to a sustainable livelihood approach, but would also firmly position social work as a social partner contributing to achieving national social developmental goals. The developmental social welfare policy and in particular the social development approach and strategy paved the way for a specialised field in this area. As with all other specialised fields, it would be the prerogative of training institutions to choose whether they wished to include economic development training in their social work curriculum, as it would require more in-depth training, thus extending the minimum requirements of the BSW programme.

As indicated by the research findings, the road through this specialised field is steep and challenging. Even if more social workers and NGOs wished to take up the challenge, they would experience the ambivalence of uncertainty, on the one hand, and knowing the potential impact on sustainable livelihoods, on the other. It would take commitment, attitude and vision for social workers to make a shift to this specialised field in social work, as one respondent so aptly encapsulated it:

*I don't know if they [social workers] can shift. But maybe if they start seeing the beauty and the importance of shifting it would be a great step [forward] in helping communities.*

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