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## **SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT: GOOD PRACTICE GUIDELINES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Faced by increasing pressure on resources, stringent policy requirements and pervasive poverty affecting communities, welfare organisations and social workers in South Africa are forced to consider changing the way they operate.

This article is based on a study that was undertaken to determine practical guidelines to help social workers and welfare organisations to implement and run social development programmes.

An in-depth literature study as well as the findings of the qualitative research undertaken, proved that success can be achieved by adhering to certain good practice criteria which the researchers identified. These criteria, considered as guideposts, could be helpful to practitioners contemplating instituting social development projects.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Few would dispute that poverty and unemployment present serious challenges in South Africa which social work as a helping profession does not seem able to respond to effectively.

Social development provides an obvious choice to combat many of the socio-economic problems confronting the majority of social work clients and communities. Significantly, social development has been accepted as government policy to combat these problems as part of the transformation process. However, there is little evidence of meaningful and effective interventions by the welfare sector. This is leading to alienation, mistrust, frustration and little cooperation between different authorities and welfare organisations (Lombard, 1996:162; Department of Social Development, 1999:41; Booyens & Tshiwula, 2001:xviii-xix).

With this in mind a study was undertaken with the aim to present practical guidelines for organisations and practitioners in the fields of social welfare, social work and social development, to implement and manage programmes aimed at social development. In underscoring this aim, the objectives were to unravel the concepts and elements of empowerment and social development and to identify success factors that were subsequently considered as criteria for good practice.

A wide ranging literature search covering different fields and disciplines dealing with social development resulted in useful, identifiable themes repeatedly appearing in the more successful programmes worldwide. Studying the good practice experiences provided rich examples of proof that by diligently applying basic principles of participation, utilising groups and networks, ensuring that training is available and encouraging innovation, programmes invariably will be successful.

These four recurring themes, identified as good practice criteria, were subsequently used in the fieldwork part of the research, undertaken amongst members of a few social development projects in the Western Cape.

## CRITICAL CONCEPTS AND DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Certain concepts are inherently part of the social development literature. The concepts of empowerment, capacity and evaluation are considered as relevant elements to unpack and examine more closely, particularly as they would feature when implementing and running social development projects.

### Empowerment

Empowerment has become a rather hackneyed term as part of the jargon of the nineties (Rowlands, 1998:11). Nevertheless, empowerment is an essential part of the vocabulary on social development and can be considered a goal as well as a result of development efforts.

The self-help concept is uppermost in the way Adams (1996:5) describes empowerment as the means whereby individuals, groups and communities become able to help themselves and others by taking control of their circumstances, setting and achieving their goals.

Empowerment is considered as an active process whereby individuals or groups are energised to higher levels of capabilities to make decisions at solving their problems. The effects of empowerment are that people experience an increase in energy and motivation, their coping and problem-solving skills as well as decision-making power improve, while positive feelings of self-esteem and self-sufficiency lead to greater self-determination (Schurink, 1998:407).

Thus empowerment can be a powerful mechanism in social development practices to benefit individuals, groups and communities.

In an investigation of the empowerment processes and experience in "real life", Rowlands (1998:18-19) describes spending time in a community of poor rural women who started small group sessions to discuss their lives and problems and started taking on small projects. Decisions were taken on a consensus basis. In time the smaller groups developed into area groups and eventually forming a council to hold workshops, discuss and plan wider issues. The way both groups and individuals benefit from participating in empowering practices is illustrated in Table 1 (Rowlands, 1998:23).

**TABLE 1**  
**EMPOWERMENT EXPERIENCED ON PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE LEVELS**

<b>PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT</b>	<b>COLLECTIVE EMPOWERMENT</b>
Self-confidence	Group identity
Self-esteem	Collective sense of agency
Sense of agency	Group dignity
Sense of 'self' in a wider context	Self-organisation and management
Dignity	

[Source: Rowlands (1998:23)]

On the basis of this project, Rowlands (1998:18-24) comes to the conclusion that empowerment can be both personal and collective. On a personal level, the women, by becoming able to identify their needs and to learn about themselves, described themselves as being more confident, able to participate actively in group discussions and being able to interact with strangers and people in authority.

Tangible proof of how these experiences changed their lives as a result of becoming empowered to take decisions and act upon them, was the women's successful negotiations to

take on the running of a grain warehouse with government approval and international funding. This was something they never would have dreamt of doing before.

Collective empowerment was identified by the ways in which the groups changed in their organisation, the activities they undertook and their interrelationships and interactions with the wider community and with the authorities.

The changes taking place in the lives of people as a result of improved income is widely recognised. Kabeer (1999:36) found that economic activity was far more indicative of positive outcomes for both welfare and empowerment than education, and that access to work and finance for an own income was particularly meaningful. This not only provides material benefits, but also new experiences and social relationships.

The concept of dignity was found to be at the centre of the empowerment process for both individuals and groups. This was illustrated by the way in which they referred to feelings of respect and honour and feeling that they deserved respect for who they are and what they do (Rowlands, 1998:24). Significantly, and as a consequence, dignity was considered a core element of empowerment.

Having self-respect at its basis, personal empowerment enhances one's ability to act, to perceive oneself as capable, to comfortably interact with others and feeling able to control resources.

By understanding that empowerment is an ongoing process, achieved through a variety of experiences, social workers and social agencies would recognise and use the inherent abilities, knowledge, experience and other basic resources that form part of the asset base of their clients and their environments in the helping process (Saleebey in Sheafor, Horejsi & Horejsi, 2000:93).

The changes experienced on a personal level as a result of feeling empowered are, by implication, unique for every person and dependent on personal circumstances and environments.

Based on the understanding that empowerment takes place on different levels, a project involving women in four Southern African countries (Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique) investigated how empowerment on one level, has effects on the other levels as well (Kvinnoforum, 2001).

Examples of empowerment on the different levels and the kinds of power involved are illustrated in table 2.

**TABLE 2  
LEVELS OF EMPOWERMENT**

<b>EMPOWERMENT LEVEL</b>	<b>KIND OF POWER</b>	<b>EXAMPLES OF EMPOWERMENT</b>
Individual level	Power within, power to	Increased: self esteem, ability to make decisions, control over life situation, gender awareness
Group level	Power with, power to	Increased: women organising, collective action to improve women's situation
Societal/community level	Power to	Change in rules and norms limiting what is possible for women to do, a political discourse allowing for gender equality

[Source: Kvinnoforum (2001:20)]

Empowerment on an individual level lead women to become able to take control over their own lives, becoming able to set goals and to gain insight in their own abilities. At group level a collective sense of agency develops to undertake activities and organise themselves. At societal or community level, empowerment results in changes affecting the lives of women in general, such as in political climates and cultural traditions.

Mosse (1993:161) describes empowerment as the only term that defines development, taking into account all aspects of people's lives. In this way empowerment is associated with a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach. This concept of empowerment thus indicates that people strive for developing self-reliance and internal strength, helping them to form alliances and organisations.

## **Capacity**

Lack of capacity is considered an area of critical concern for government, donors and organisations involved in social development programmes in South Africa. Gaining knowledge from experience and learning about resources, considered as important elements of capacity for development, is lacking. (Soni, 2000:106).

To develop capacity is referred to by the UNDP (United Nations Development Program, 1997:1) as a process whereby individuals, organisations, institutions and societies gain the abilities to enable them to not only perform certain functions, but also to become able to solve their problems and to set and achieve collective goals.

It appears that the implementation of social development programmes constitutes a huge challenge to the individuals, organisations, institutions and societies that are expected to deliver social, human and welfare services. The challenge implies changes in behaviour, procedures and practices to meet the requirements to perform social development functions successfully.

Different authors have alluded to what these requirements are. Chambers (1998:XV), having extensively documented the concept of learning from participation in development, maintains that for development to be sustainable, not only methods and procedures have to change, but also institutional cultures, personal behaviour and attitudes. He believes that changing personal behaviour and attitudes are most important because people in authority nearly always have to unlearn dominating behaviour which inhibits participation, in order to be able to interact in non-dominating, empowering ways.

Rowlands (1998:25-29) refers to "change agents" or "catalysts" as experts from related fields with skills and knowledge, but above all with the personal attributes of positive attitudes of respect, humility and willingness to learn and who are committed to development as a process. A well-developed sense of self-awareness and insight into personal preferences and biases are further attributes.

Institutions and organisations wishing to become involved in grassroots projects with empowerment and development goals have to resist imposing their own views and agendas. Rather, the concept of alliance building is recommended for sharing goals and responsibilities. It is further stated that networking skills can be brought in by promoting the concept of alliances or partnerships. Networks with other institutions and organisations can be particularly valuable to the process by enhancing it with access to facilities, resources, knowledge or infrastructure that otherwise would not have been tapped.

Midgley (1997:190-192) advocates that organisations be created to take responsibility for social development at regional and local levels. Such social agencies have to work closely with national economic development agencies to integrate the social and economic goals of development, while allowing for and respecting different styles and approaches.

Bergdall (2000:26-28) believes that changing behaviour and attitude is important for individuals and organisations wanting to be involved in development projects that rely on the participation of those targeted by the programmes. This belief is driven by the notion that behaviour is governed by images, because people act according to their image of themselves and how people react to them. This self-perception determines attitudes, beliefs and opinions.

Judging from these descriptions, it appears that, in order to address the lack of capacity that exists at both institutional and community levels, special and innovative ways of learning and a break from the conventional methods of telling and giving instructions are required.

## **Evaluation**

There would be general agreement about the necessity of evaluation to be part of all development activities. Different opinions about the reasons and purpose for carrying out evaluation determine the differences between the methods used to reach the desired results.

For South Africans, who lately have been receiving international funding to deal with poverty and deprivation, a healthy way of managing the transformation process would be to instil a culture of insistence on accountability for interventions. This view is echoed by the *Synthesis Report on Development Cooperation in South Africa* (Soni, 2000:12), which states that this is one way to ensure that such funding makes a significant contribution to the country's development.

Taking the cost, capacity and other resource requirements for doing evaluations into consideration, it can be accepted that not all development programmes justify the effort. In view of this "daunting task", Prenzushi, Rubio and Subbaroa (2000:12) provide a few guidelines to determine when poverty alleviation programmes deserve to be evaluated, namely:

- when programmes are considered to be of strategic relevance to a region or country
- when knowledge can be gained about poverty reduction (what works and what doesn't work)
- when a programme or policy uses an innovative approach
- when programmes are aimed at communities or groups that are difficult to reach geographically, or at special groups, such as women.

Baker (2000:17) agrees that impact evaluations should be done in the case of costly projects that are innovative, can be replicated and have well-defined strategies.

The learning aspect is often lost when looking for successful outcomes and this aspect deserves more attention. This becomes clear when poverty is treated not only as a state but also as a process, which recognises that there are different causes and contributing elements that need to be taken into consideration. Not only social and environmental factors, but also achievements and failures should be assessed, with the stakeholders themselves being involved (Thomas-Slayter & Sodikoff, 2001:46).

This perspective is echoed by Perrin (2000:6), who promotes the idea of learning from what has *not* worked as a possible source for innovation in programmes. He further warns against

the indiscriminate and inappropriate use of mean scores and aggregation, as these can sidetrack and cover up the real situation (2000:8).

## **CRITERIA FOR GOOD PRACTICE IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

Common recurring elements or themes have been found in successful development programmes that could be considered as criteria for good practice when implementing and running such projects.

These themes or criteria are:

- Participation in planning, decision making and implementation
- Groups, organisations and networks
- Learning, training and the acquiring of knowledge
- Innovation.

In identifying and exploring these elements from a social work perspective, it forces a turn about from the traditional problem orientation, focusing on clients' deficiencies, to a perspective that focuses and builds on strengths and capabilities, as described by Sheafor *et al.* (2000:93). The application of these elements is found to be of specific relevance in community work and community development, as described by Weyers (2001), in group work (Tropp, 1977) and by viewing communities as clients (Homan, 1999:23–27).

### **Participation**

Changing the way decisions are made is believed to be at the heart of successful social development programmes. This is achieved by what is referred to as bottom-up approaches; with a strong emphasis on listening and asking on the part of development workers in order to make sure the 'voices of the poor' are accessed (Whitehead & Lockwood, 1999:543). Weyers (2001:110–135) explains the importance of participation in the community development model and explains how to apply it in welfare-related projects.

A distinction is made between passive and active participation by Thomas-Slayter and Sodikoff (2001:50). They consider it passive participation when the initiative comes largely as information from an outsider, such as a donor, often in the form of suggestions or instructions and leading to dependency. In contrast, when community members themselves become involved as their own agents of change, although they may work in cooperation with outside resources, active participation arises within that community. The advantages are that leadership develops and organisations grow as a result of the initiatives they undertake (Thomas-Slayter & Sodikoff, 2001:51).

This view has seen the development of many NGOs and community organisations in developing countries, as pointed out by Oakley and Clegg (1999:40) who refer to various studies illustrating the increasing role of local development organisations. These voluntary community organisations have been particularly prominent in respect of economic reform and income-generating programmes.

Other studies, by Gooneratne and Mbilinyi (1992), Bergdall (1993) and Cromwell (1996), have all contributed to examining the concept of participatory development within an African context and to show its increasing relevance and practice.

Abatena (1997:13-17) cites a selection of works to explain the reasons for grassroots participation in solving community problems. He reasons that a growing consensus considers

participation as essential to successful programmes. Some of the side effects of such participation is the growth in leadership of community members, resulting in increased self-confidence and self-esteem and increased competence in addressing their problems themselves, thus moving away from the 'client' mentality.

Of particular relevance for practitioners in social work, social welfare and social development are the reasons for and the significant advantages of grassroots participation provided by Abatena, (1997).

*Firstly*, grassroots participation will ensure that problems are diagnosed and defined appropriately and clearly, which in turn will help to decide on solutions that are appropriate and feasible.

*Secondly*, being involved in and actively participating in the process of deciding on solutions allows for a wider range of possible solutions, consideration of the practical aspects of implementing them as well as of their benefits and, most importantly, who the main beneficiaries are going to be. This cuts out the bad practice of growing bureaucracies and of a few benefiting at the cost of the rest.

*Thirdly*, participating in decision making about solutions help to ensure successful implementation, because people are more agreeable to do the things they themselves decided on or helped others to decide on. Programmes also stand a better chance of being sustained because of the community's self-interest in it, their sense of pride and the personal learning benefits they experience. Successful implementation of initial programmes also often leads to other initiatives and projects.

### **Groups, organisations and networks**

Tropp (1977:1322-1327) discusses the application of the social group work model in enhancing social functioning in a development context and shows how social workers, using a developmental approach and utilising their clients' competencies, can help them realise their full potential. The valuable role of groups in community work is also described by Weyers (2001:25-26) pointing out the purpose and focus of different types of groups.

Women have found belonging to groups to be particularly beneficial in development programmes. The value derived from belonging to women's groups has been spelled out by Rowlands (1998: 29), who refers to them as 'allies' for women's development. Their non-financial benefits, such as access to resources, providing networking opportunities, offering personal support by assisting members with knowledge and access to development opportunities, make them a special resource.

Various organisations that have proved to be particularly beneficial to women in social development projects have been reported on. Thomas-Slayter and Sodikoff (2001:52) describe the Women in Agricultural Development Project (WIADP) in Malawi as being distinctly beneficial to women, who form farm clubs to gain access to credit, knowledge and funding. These authors consider belonging to such organisations and groups as important indicators for successful development projects.

### **Learning, training and development**

There would be general agreement that the processes of learning and acquiring knowledge and skills should form part of all development programmes and projects. According to Weyers (2001:162-163), education forms a particularly important part of community work in South



Africa as it can help to empower communities in overcoming and eliminating ignorance by improving the literacy and skills levels.

Women in South Africa have distinctly been disadvantaged in respect of training opportunities. Many did not have access to formal education in the past and they often miss out on remedial programmes such as literacy classes or other adult education programmes due to cultural factors, time constraints, distance to facilities or other commitments. These factors contribute further to a state of underdevelopment (Midgley, 1995:72). Women are also often overlooked due to a lack of gender sensitivity on the part of organisations offering programmes to address educational needs. Thus, a need for education, not only 'for' women, but also 'about' women for those responsible for instituting development programmes becomes necessary to ensure their successful inclusion in such projects.

Thomas-Slayter and Sodikoff (2001:50) consider training as an enabling condition, describing the important roles played by women in donor-driven farming projects in Africa. To this extent, they felt that basic training as well as extended training is essential for success in development projects and therefore training was found to be an integral part of success in all the projects.

The advantages of learning as part of development programmes contribute vastly to the total empowerment process of the participants. Learning on different levels, as determined by the needs of members, therefore has to be considered crucial to any programme if it is to become sustainable and long term.

## **Innovation**

Accepting that development is a process and a dynamic concept, which implies that growth and change are to be expected, innovation should be considered as an important criterion for effective development programmes. Weyers (2001:201-203) describes the way in which new ideas are dealt with in community work practices and the characteristics of innovators, pointing out that social workers have to accept that people differ in how they accept new ideas.

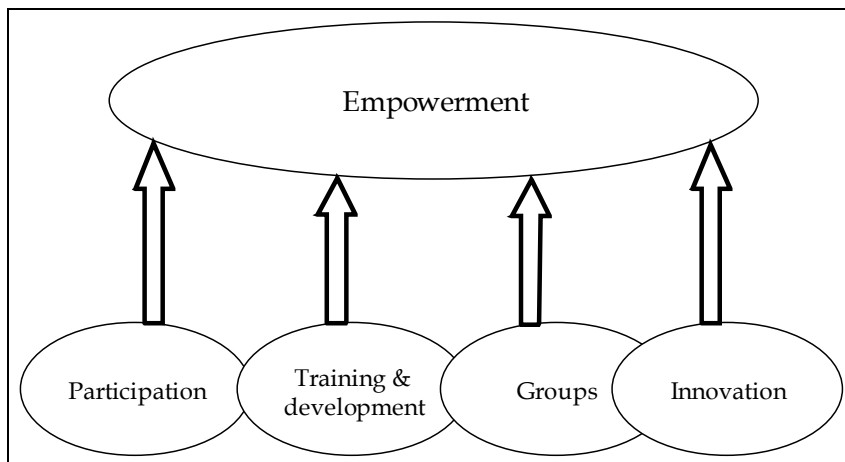
Peter Drucker, quoted in the Harvard Business Review (1998:149) on innovation as an important element of entrepreneurship, listed the qualities that are associated with innovation. Some of these are that innovation is simple, it starts small, it requires knowledge and often ingenuity, as well as hard work and diligence. It also often follows on initial failures. A number of good practice development programmes have shown that innovation is an element that can contribute to their effectiveness.

Innovation was one of the motivations for the Department of Social Development (2000) to implement the Flagship Programmes, which involve start-up pilot projects aimed at the economic empowerment of unemployed poor women. Significantly, it appears that the programmes that seem to be the most successful also show a higher indication of innovative behaviour.

Figure 1 illustrates the interrelatedness of the four elements namely participation, groups and networks, training and innovation, which are considered important criteria in successful social development projects, resulting in empowerment.



**FIGURE 1**  
**ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS RESULTING**  
**IN EMPOWERMENT**



It becomes clear that the "elusive" concept of empowerment relies on the changes taking place as a result of being exposed to these elements, identified as criteria for successful development projects.

### **THE PERCEPTIONS AND VIEWS OF MEMBERS OF A FEW SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS IN THE WESTERN CAPE**

The fieldwork part of the study was undertaken amongst the members of a few selected social development projects for women in the Western Cape.

#### **Research method**

An explorative descriptive design for the study was considered 'sensible' as explained by Grinnell (1988:225) being a suitable method of inquiry when the area of research is not well developed. The research concerned an area about which not much is known in this country, namely an understanding of the success factors in social development projects (Grinnell in De Vos, 1998:124). Thus, as basic research, the focus of the study was to explore and describe dimensions and aspects of development and empowerment, to identify success factors as criteria in social development projects and to describe the experiences of women members of social development projects in terms of these criteria.

The **qualitative** research approach was chosen in view of the evaluative nature of the study, although it was **not** intended as an evaluation of specific programmes and their effectiveness and achievements, but was aimed at determining the personal experiences and views of members of such programmes.

This approach was thought to be the most appropriate considering the objective of the investigation, which was to describe and understand, rather than explain, the experiences and behaviour of members of social development projects (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:270).

Weighing up the advantages of qualitative information when monitoring development programmes, Bergdall (2000:150) makes a convincing case by emphasising the value of personal "stories and anecdotes" to describe changes taking place as a result of becoming empowered, which is considered to form the base of successful social development programmes.

A non-probability sampling technique was applied. A purposive *sample* of five development projects was selected based on the researcher's judgement (Strydom & De Vos, 1998:198). The choice of projects in the sample was made on conceptual, not representative grounds, taking into account their settings and individual processes (Miles & Huberman, 1994:30–31), as well as for practical reasons of accessibility and the time factor. Therefore, the five projects were chosen on account of geographical spread between urban and rural areas, length of time in existence (1 year+), having organisational structures in place and having significant female involvement. Four projects were selected from a list of projects provided by the district offices of the Department of Social Services and one obtained from FCW (Foundation for Community Work). Activities of projects included in the sample covered food gardening, pre-school facilities, sewing, craft making, a bakery, provision of meals, fruit tree groves, handwork and wirework.

This was done on the understanding that projects in the sample would have similar characteristics to the other projects on the lists obtained from the Department of Social Services and FCW. Thus conclusions could be drawn about the characteristics of all the projects (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990:53), as well as allowing for the specific different types or groups, in this case women, as subjects of the study.

At the request of the researcher, the project members themselves selected participants of not more than six members per focus group. Smaller groups are believed to provide more opportunity for participation, with increased satisfaction of the members and allowing more interaction between them, thereby also contributing to positive feelings amongst them (Dimock, 1987:26).

*Focus groups* were chosen as the preferred method in view of the qualitative data that was required. In this way meaningful information about feelings, their way of thinking, their perceptions and points of view of the participants could be obtained (Krueger & Casey, 2000:10). The key characteristic distinguishing focus groups, namely the interaction between the participants to provide information and insight (Gibbs, 1997), was found to be especially beneficial.

The focus group sessions were conducted with the aid of an interview guide in the form of semi-structured, open-ended questions. The questionnaire served as a map for the path that would be followed by the researcher when dealing with the specific issues considered relevant to the field of study, namely to elicit the views and feelings of respondents based on their experiences as members of social development projects. Neumann (2000:420) points out that themes and concepts, rather than variables, serve as the analytical tools for qualitative studies.

To this end the question guide covered the topics spelled out in the objectives of the study, namely to investigate women's experiences relating to their empowerment as well as their views on the criteria identified for good practice in development programmes. Therefore, the questions dealt specifically with the respondents' perceptions and views, based on their experiences in respect of participation, training, groups and innovation.

A total of 23 women participated in the sample of five focus groups. The groups in the sample represented a total of 87 project members.

**TABLE 3**  
**BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF FOCUS GROUPS**  
**PROJECTS**

<b>DEMO-GRAPHICS</b>	<b>GROUP A</b>	<b>GROUP B</b>	<b>GROUP C</b>	<b>GROUP D</b>	<b>GROUP E</b>
<b>Setting</b>	Housed in a semi-detached building in a residential township of a medium- size rural town	Housed in a shipping container in a residential township in an urban area	Church yard and sections of a church building in a residential township in an urban area	Housed in section of community development building in small rural town	Housed in shipping containers in residential township in urban area
<b>Age of project</b>	18 months	2 years	4 years	8 years	3 years
<b>Origin</b>	Government's poverty relief funding for mothers of young children	Community outreach project for job creation and skills training	Evolved from a soup kitchen for under nourished children & poverty relief funding	RDP [Reconstruction & Development Programme] Government's poverty relief funding 1997/98	Government's poverty relief funding and unemployed social work clients
<b>Total members</b>	5	14	36	27	5
<b>Activities</b>	Bakery, runs as a small enterprise	Sewing, baking, youth outreach; life skills training	Food gardens & child care	Sewing, daily meal service, crafts, date & olive groves	Sewing, knitting, crafts
<b>Support structures</b>	A bookkeeper assists with financial management. Training paid for by Dept. of Social Services	Professional mentor assisting with needs assessments	Dept. of Social Services paid for training; Local council interest & support	District council manages finances; provides active, practical support	Medical School, International donor, mentor
<b>Atmosphere and culture</b>	Rigid working schedules of 2 shifts. Age difference between members	Comradeship amongst members; active community awareness	Optimism & positive outlook; group cohesion	Group cohesion in one active part of project; Other part is long-term and dormant	Commitment & pride in workmanship
<b>Concerns</b>	Isolation; Requires additional equipment to expand activities	Requires suitable and convenient venue for activities	Requires resources to expand activities to more members	Lacks wider community participation & involvement	Dependence on donor and mentor

Table 3 reflects the background information and project characteristics of the five projects represented by the sample of five focus groups. Information was obtained from the two referring sources (Department of Social Services and FCW), from the members and from observations.

The information in Table 3 shows some commonalities, as well as differences between the five projects. Commonalities include the fact that the venues used by all the projects for their activities are semi-permanent or makeshift accommodation. Most of the projects include members who receive government poverty relief funding. A positive atmosphere relating to

their work, as well as sound interrelationships, were particularly evident at four of the projects. Three of the projects include activities that have to do with the production or preparation of food. Two of the projects have bookkeeping services provided by outsiders. All the projects have clear ideas of what their needs and concerns are. These vary and include infrastructure, equipment, wider community involvement and greater independence.

**TABLE 4**  
**SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP FEEDBACK ON PARTICIPATION**

<b>Participation</b>	<b>Group A</b>	<b>Group B</b>	<b>Group C</b>	<b>Group D</b>	<b>Group E</b>
<b>To get members involved</b>	All involved, plan together and accept ownership	Show respect and understanding, share information	Individual members share their experiences and benefits of project with newcomers	Create feelings of togetherness and belonging, share tasks, all members provide input for project activities	Preparedness to learn from one another, patience, learn to show respect
<b>Involvement in planning</b>	Agreement that all must be part of planning	Involve from initial stages; all must be fully informed	All members discuss and decide together on project plans	Have open discussions of all proposals	All members have equal say in plans
<b>Division of work</b>	All members share in allocation of tasks	Coordinator asks for volunteers for different tasks	Members decide according to their interests	Asked to volunteer according to interest, skills & knowledge	Coordinator assesses competencies and accordingly asks for volunteers
<b>Obtaining funding &amp; new members</b>	Proposals are encouraged at meetings; task teams appointed	All members share responsibility	All members are encouraged to think & to discuss ideas	Everybody is aware of needs and is encouraged to share responsibility	Discussed at weekly meetings; co-ownership is encouraged
<b>Handling problems</b>	All members must discuss problems together	Depending on type of problem – can be referred for professional help or discussed by all	Group discussion of problem and possible solutions	Problems must be 'brought into the open' & handled in the project	Members discuss openly; acquire problem-solving techniques; those causing problems apologise
<b>Deciding on leadership</b>	All members decide together	Members elect leaders at annual meetings	Leaders elected annually; committee members elected as nominated	All members elect leaders annually	All members elect leadership

**Findings**

The focus group respondents echoed the advantages of participation in social development projects. Abbreviated information on the respondents' views is displayed in a checklist matrix format, described by Miles and Huberman (1994:105) as being suitable for the analysis of data covering a main area of study.

Table 4 shows some responses by focus group participants on ways to get members participating and involved in projects. The results shown in table 4 indicate the strong feelings expressed by respondents about the importance of participation in different aspects of the projects. There was general consensus amongst the respondents in all the focus groups that they have to make deliberate efforts to get members involved and to participate in different processes of their projects.

To get prospective and new members involved, one of the respondents described how comradeship and feelings of togetherness are created by sharing and telling about their own experiences, thus confirming the power of ‘stories of change’, described by Bergdall (2000), to get participation at different levels in development projects. Some respondents pointed out that they considered a positive outlook a great help to attract and assimilate new members.

Other practical measures described by some of the respondents involved the holding of special information workshops for newcomers to help them identify their training needs and their attributes, capabilities and interests. Such workshops provide opportunities for doing needs assessments, as described by Homan (1999:118–121), which allow not only for highlighting unmet needs, but also to identify resources. To recognise and build on existing capabilities can be a strong element to empower groups in community work practices by identifying possible existing capabilities and resources (Kretzman & McNight in Homan, 1999:122). Thus, by applying the strength perspective (Saleebey in Sheafor *et al.*, 2000:93) in such sessions, long-lasting change and motivation can develop in the groups.

Some respondents explained that the way in which they encourage participation and cooperation is to build team spirit by sharing tasks, singing while they work, sharing ideas amongst everybody, chatting and telling jokes. Most respondents considered it important that members must at all times be kept fully informed of all aspects of the project, thereby encouraging participation and engendering feelings of ownership, as described by Thomas-Slayer and Sodikoff (2001:56), in order to prolong the lifetime of projects.

The necessity for perseverance was referred to on a number of occasions. It was emphasised that members must be prepared to persevere and to persist with what they set out to do, even when they face obstacles. A respondent who felt particularly strong about this said “members have to accept that a development project is like a small tree, it takes time to grow and it needs regular watering and feeding to grow, therefore they must be prepared to start small and to keep going”

Other respondents felt that participation is encouraged when members are prepared to help one another, thereby building sound interrelationships. In this way they act as role models and assist in changing perceptions and helping to promote the development of self-esteem and mutual respect (Mosse, 1993:171).

The respondents were in full agreement that all members should have a say and participate in decision-making relating to all aspects of their projects. Taking part in planning the work and the allocation of tasks was considered by all respondents to be necessary in order to get members fully committed. Some respondents indicated that, by involving members from an early stage, it is ensured that they “feel ownership and will buy in from the beginning because they feel partly responsible”. This view supports Abatena’s theory (1997:23) that involvement in planning increases the prospects for success when programmes are implemented because people tend to support decisions they made themselves or were part of.

Most respondents expressed the view that work should be allocated according to personal interest as well as the skills and knowledge of the members. The appointment of qualified outsiders to take responsibility for certain functions, such as quality control, stock control and finances, was indicated as being helpful when members felt uncertain about their own abilities. This practice supports Abatena's (1997:29) theory that people and communities are capable of helping themselves at grassroots level if the necessary assistance is provided on technical aspects. Thereby, members' capabilities towards self-empowerment and independence stand a better chance of being developed.

All the respondents felt that members should be co-responsible for the financial aspects of projects. Some related the benefits of dividing duties between task groups, but said that all members must be encouraged to make proposals about funding and possible sources of income. All the groups made it clear that they considered it an essential responsibility of members to be fully informed about the finances of their projects. In this regard Weyers (2001:131) points out that, due to the high rate of unemployment in the country, income-generating projects usually form part of community development projects and that money management should be covered as part of a community education model.

On the subject of the recruitment of new members, one respondent referred to the value of having regular meetings where membership and selection procedures can also be discussed. Others felt that "new members are selected on account of their skills and knowledge and the contribution they can make to the project".

Abatena (1997:29) explains that problem solving becomes more meaningful and productive when dealing with disputes and disagreements that crop up in projects, if all those concerned participate in finding solutions, thereby also helping to avoid future conflicts. The majority of respondents who acknowledged that they encounter problems in their projects felt that members of the project must deal with problems openly. Some respondents emphasised the importance of having clear rules including codes of conduct, which all members must decide on and subscribe to, in order to determine how issues, including problems, are dealt with. One respondent said that "it is best to have written-out lists of rules as well as everyone's responsibilities and duties and to have these openly displayed".

In the discussion about their views on leadership issues, all groups, particularly those with larger memberships, indicated the necessity of having regular, e.g. annual, general meetings to elect leadership positions such as a board and committees. In this regard, it was said that "To have a constitution and rules is essential for a project to function properly".

The focus group respondents were all in agreement about the importance of leadership in their projects, which supports the well-documented views on leadership roles in community work and group work by authors such as Homan (1999:293–294), who describes the needs for leadership and leadership development in projects, Dimock (1987), who expounds the functions and characteristics of leaders and Weyers (2001), who refers to the development of leadership as an essential part of skills development in community development and community work.

**TABLE 5**  
**SUMMARY OF VIEWS ON TYPES OF TRAINING**

Types of training	Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	Group E
<b>'How-to' training</b>	Important and sufficient time required	Important & to be fully proficient takes 4-5 weeks	Very important for gardening and child care projects	Very important for skills training	Essential for task training to do work of project
<b>Extended training</b>	Necessary for new ideas and improving and extending product ranges	In demand by members to advance their knowledge	Found to be very beneficial	Considered as essential and stimulating	Considered as necessary to improve and learn new methods
<b>Marketing skills</b>	Important and necessary for promoting project	Necessary. Specially designated person/group can be used	Necessary. Want it for the project	Want to learn about the planning of marketing events	Interested. Considered as necessary
<b>Financial knowledge</b>	Considered as helpful. Outside person handles project finances	It is a need. Included in some courses. Required to understand financial reports	Experienced finance courses difficult but helpful. Contributed to feeling empowered.	Very important. Financial duties can be divided amongst members	Very important to receive training. Need a finance committee
<b>Management</b>	Uncertain about the necessity of it for small groups	Necessary to divide work and make members co-responsible for project work	Necessary to learn additional people skills	Need project management knowledge and to identify training needs of members	Considered as important for project
<b>Leadership</b>	Not aware of existence of such courses	Necessary to decide on division of work/duties between members	Required for the continuation of the project. Strongly support the concept	Need it for successful continuation of project	Consider it as very important

*Training and development* are further elements regarded as of major importance for successful social development projects.

An abridged format of the views of respondents on *types* of training is presented in a checklist matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994:105) in Table 5.

The respondents felt strongly that prospective members should receive suitable training before they start working on a project and in that way become capable and prepared for the work expected of them. This view supports the enabling function of training and development, which is considered by Thomas-Slyter and Sodikoff (2001:50) as being central to successful projects.

The respondents were also in full agreement about continued training to learn new and different methods to improve their work. It was said that “members want it, although not all have had the opportunity to undergo further training”. Those who have received further and advanced training consider it “essential as it serves to stimulate an interest in and commitment



for the project”. Some commented that “we used to do things the old way, now we know much better, because we know so much more”.

Most respondents expressed a need for know-how about marketing, especially on how to make their projects and products known in different communities. Some indicated that they would like to receive training on how to effectively plan their marketing efforts.

All the respondents expressed a keen interest in learning about financial matters and money management. Significantly all the respondents viewed knowledge about budgeting as essential for both themselves and for their projects. They indicated different ways in which they had benefited personally and all felt that training in money management was essential. This confirms the views of Weyers (2001:99) namely that learning about financial management should be an inherent part of skills training and education practices in community work.

Most respondents expressed an interest in and considered it advisable that training should be available for members to develop their management and leadership skills. They were of the opinion that these skills were needed to ensure the continuation of projects and their future success.

When discussing the different methods of training the participants were unanimous in their support for on-the-job training with accompanying demonstrations on the different activities of the project. All felt it was more beneficial to learn your job at the place where you have to do it. They believed it more appropriate for the assimilation of information and felt that it contributes towards a better understanding of individual tasks, roles and responsibilities. To train in groups was the preferred method of all respondents, also when they attend courses elsewhere. It was said that it is popular among members.

All the respondents in the focus groups viewed visits to other projects, programmes and events as very popular educational experiences among their members for the value it adds in broadening their knowledge and insights. In view of the positive responses to different aspects of learning and training, it was clear that the focus groups considered knowledge as an important building block for empowering women in social development projects.

Both Weyers (2001:162) and Bergdall (2000:194) describe the relationship between power and knowledge and how, by utilising a bottom-up approach in development projects, the learning experiences lead to empowering all stakeholders.

All respondents in the focus groups expressed positive views on belonging to *groups*. Their views were made clear by remarks such as “belonging to clubs and groups offer a supportive environment – to be with other women with similar interests”; “women’s groups offer opportunities to grow and develop”; “they create feelings of cohesiveness for members”; “belonging to organisations can help to get wider support for our ideas and what we are doing”.

Referring to the empowering value of groups, a respondent expressed her feelings by saying that “it is a good idea for women to work together, that way we learn that we can do things by ourselves and we are strong and we can – and we mustn’t be afraid”; “it helps to build one’s self-esteem”; “it is empowering to be a member of a bigger organisation”.

All respondents saw value in women’s organisations in terms of the learning opportunities and the support from others with the same interests, thereby helping to build self-esteem and feelings of empowerment. These sentiments bear out the findings of Tripp (1994:112-113) on the ways in which various organisations, such as church groups, saving associations and

business organisations provide training and other assistance to start income-generating projects for poor women.

When dealing with the questions relating to cooperation and *networking* with official bodies, all the respondents in the focus groups felt that local councils should take an interest in and be involved in social development projects in their areas. Some of the views expressed were that “local councils have a responsibility towards developments in their areas and they can provide useful networks with other organisations and service providers”; “they should provide help by means of assisting with resources and facilities”; “projects can’t exist in isolation, council must be aware of our existence and what we do”. Other respondents expressed opinions on the practical ways in which councils could be supporting their efforts.

When discussing the concept of *innovation* in the focus groups, all the respondents felt that new ideas are very necessary and can even determine a project’s survival. Perrin (2000:1-6) refers to innovation as doing things in a better or different way. Time and patience to learn new and different ways of doing things are important in order to find improvements. The respondents in the focus groups expressed a marked interest in the concept of innovation and were of the opinion that new ideas are needed to extend product ranges, but also to keep the work interesting. It was stated explicitly that “we need new ideas otherwise the work becomes too boring”; “we are interested in and we want change, we find that new ideas are stimulating to everybody”. Linking innovation to the motivational value of training and the stimulation that new knowledge provides, some respondents described the need for innovation in their projects saying “it’s very necessary for project members to get new ideas to be able to extend our product ranges”; “new ideas is stimulating everybody”; “new ideas make the work more interesting to carry on with”.

All the focus groups indicated that they consider visits to other projects and events, such as shows and exhibitions, as the best stimulus for developing new ideas. This supports the findings of Critchley (1999) who, in a UNDP report on farmer innovation in East Africa, identified that a useful source of inspiration for farmers with successful, innovative ideas was the fact that they had travelled to other areas and seen other successful projects. Another significant source of inspiration proved to be training. The most important reason given as motivation for starting innovative projects proved to be a need to improve living conditions, namely income generation.

The discussion on empowerment and their feelings about personal changes that they had experienced since becoming involved in the projects elicited the most enthusiastic responses from respondents in all the sessions. The way in which respondents expressed their feelings concurred with the views of Rowlands (1998:23), who describes empowerment experiences as being both personal and collective. In all the focus groups, the respondents alternatively referred to their experiences in the singular and in the plural by statements such as “we can stand on our own feet now”; “we find it much easier to express opinions now”; “we have also learnt to trust one another as we got to know everybody better”; “we feel nothing can stop us!”

The respondents described the changes they had experienced since joining the projects by statements such as “I feel positive about myself for what I have learned and experienced, I feel enthusiastic and I want to learn more”; “I feel proud about what I feel I have achieved and about the courage I’ve shown to persevere”; “I was very unsure of myself, now I feel more confident and I realise I can also make a difference in other people’s lives”; “I consider this a growth process and want to continue growing”; “I have been able to discover my own potential and feel good about myself. I have also become much more involved in different other things

as well – my life is fuller ”; “I was very depressed and sad, now I can sleep well, I am happy, I feel much better about myself”; “We feel free now – we know what we are going to do tomorrow”.

Having a sense of dignity was identified by Rowlands (1998:23-24) as an element of both personal and collective empowerment and considered to be the “core of empowerment”. It is understood to refer to having self-respect, honour and a sense of self-worth, and having a “right to receive respect from others”. The reactions of the respondents endorsed this view in the way in which they described how they are perceived in their communities: “we are respected as women for what we have achieved, we are more respected now than before”; “Everyone around here is excited by what we do and what we have achieved, when we have a problem they come and offer help”; “The community show respect for what we do and support us”.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following conclusions can be drawn from the research findings –

- Social development and empowerment are not a domain dominated by one discipline or methodology, but ideally should have a multi-disciplinary approach.
- Development is a process and not a ‘quick-fix’ for needy individuals, groups and communities. It requires thorough planning, monitoring and evaluation. The willingness to learn in new and different ways, to act in new and different ways, and also the willingness to unlearn, can add to building capacity, skills and knowledge.
- The lack of capacity and expertise experienced in many fields has a lot to do with personal behaviour and attitudes. Lack of capacity could be addressed by community networking skills and by pooling resources of different role-players working together in programmes, exchanging knowledge and expertise and thereby also learning from one another.
- Empowerment, implying change and focusing on the strength perspective in social work, was found to be both a goal and a result of development processes, although those instituting the programmes might not initially view it as a goal.
- Individuals and groups become empowered by their participation in social development activities. This was confirmed by the findings of the empirical research as all the focus groups reported strong feelings of being empowered as a result of working as teams in the projects.
- Earning an income contributes considerably to becoming empowered.
- Personal empowerment leads to feeling happier and having more confidence in oneself and also manifests positively in personal relationships.
- The participants in the focus groups proved the criteria identified and described as good practice, as being important success factors when dealing with the "how" of social development, namely that
  - the participation of members in social development projects, utilising bottom-up approaches contributes to the success of projects,
  - training and development are equally vital elements for success and to utilise different types and methods of training can make a significant difference to members’ experiences,
  - the value of belonging to groups or organisations provide valuable support and learning mechanisms,

- the concept of innovation as being necessary for the success of projects was borne out by the high value ascribed to it by the focus group participants.

The following *recommendations* are made –

- The elements identified as criteria for successful projects in the study, namely participation, groups, training and innovation, should be included in the planning, monitoring and evaluation procedures and practices of social development projects.
- Welfare organisations should form working relationships and partnerships with the sectors responsible for development in government departments such as Water Affairs and Forestry, Agriculture and Land Affairs, Environmental Affairs and Tourism and Trade and Industry, as well as with the local and district councils of their areas, to establish local social development projects. Such combined projects will benefit poor communities, improve service delivery, contribute to better accountability, help improve the image of organisations and stand a better chance of receiving funding.
- Combined project teams to address specific problem areas at different levels, should be established between the Department of Social Development and social work structures and practitioners.
- A study should be undertaken to establish the feasibility and best structure of a national coordinating body for social development programmes.
- A study should be undertaken to compile a practical guide for establishing and running social development projects in South Africa.

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