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Social Workers Shaping Welfare Policy in South Africa: The White Paper for Social Welfare and Lessons for Policy Practice

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Introduction

This perspective was created from Leila Patel's keynote address to the conference *Social Innovation and Engagement: Social Challenges, Policy Practice, and Professional Training of Social Workers*, which was held at Washington University in St. Louis on April 6-8, 2014. The Center for Social Development at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work invited Dr. Patel to tell her story of the White Paper for Social Welfare.

Birth of a New Nation

Adopted in 1997, the White Paper for Social Welfare was one of the early policy initiatives of the post-apartheid government led by South Africa's former president, Nelson Mandela. The Paper is significant because it broke with past inequitable, inappropriate, and undemocratic welfare policies of the apartheid era.¹ It also set the policy framework for social welfare in a post-apartheid society. The inauguration of Nelson Mandela as President in 1994 heralded the birth of the new nation. Mr. Mandela symbolized the opportunity to dismantle the old and create a new constitutional democracy that would uphold social rights. This was an important moment in South Africa's history. This context provided a unifying force to develop a national consensus of social welfare despite different ideologies, interests, social divisions, and social concerns in the society. It was a time of nation building, healing the wounds of the past, and public engagement in policy making. This period also marked the formal end of 300 years of Dutch and British colonialism and apartheid.

¹ Apartheid was a system of institutionalized racial segregation that was the policy of the Nationalist Party Government between 1948 and 1994. It classified the population into four race groups: Whites, Africans, Coloureds, and Indians.

White Paper Preamble

The White Paper preamble states the following:

South Africans are called upon to participate in the development of an equitable, people-centred, democratic and appropriate social welfare system. The goal is the creation of a humane, peaceful, just, and caring society which will uphold welfare rights, facilitate the meeting of basic human needs, release people's creative energies, help them achieve their aspirations, build human capacity and self-reliance, and participate fully in all spheres of social, economic, and political life. South Africans will be afforded the opportunity to play an active role in promoting their own well-being and in contributing to the growth and development of our nation. (Department of Welfare and Population Development, 1997)

The preamble could be read in different ways. For some, it might suggest a residual or a neo-liberal approach, while others might see it as rather institutionalist in its formulation. It also has elements of human agency and human capabilities and features productivist thinking about the role of social policies in promoting economic and social development. The notion of people's participation in social welfare is captured in popular demands that were articulated by grassroots organizations for "people's education" and from progressive social workers for "people's welfare" and "welfare for all" in the 1980s. All of these ideas informed progressive social workers' thinking about developmental social welfare, which is the overarching approach to social policy in a post-apartheid society. South Africa is one of the few countries in the world that adopted an explicitly developmental approach



to social welfare in the mid-1990s. Its political, economic, and social history as well as the country's tradition of colonial- and apartheid-driven social policy informed these ideas. Patterns of racial and class inequality were established early in the country's history. Ideological beliefs of racial superiority of the White settlers permeated all aspects of social welfare. These patterns formed a powerful justification for apartheid, including issues of accessibility to services and benefits that were racially differentiated.

Constitution Making from Below: A Vision for a New South Africa

South Africans' history of resistance was a powerful early influence in policy development. International developments, such as the UN World Summit for Social Development held in Copenhagen in 1995, also influenced the thinking on social-welfare policy. James Midgley, a former South African based at the London School of Economics, was actively engaged in research and publishing on social development and social welfare in developing countries. The "development under-development" thesis on how the first world developed at the expense of the developing world resonated with South Africans struggling to understand race and class inequality in their society (Midgley, 1995). Midgley's work on professional imperialism was particularly instructive in that regard (1981). Therefore, there was certainly some influential diffusion of global social-policy ideas about social welfare, particularly in relation to the British social-policy tradition. Much of this literature at the time was not accessible to South Africans as it was well before the information age, but also because apartheid repression restricted access to research and scholarly work elsewhere in the world.

I had the opportunity to study in the United States as a Fulbright scholar and completed my masters of social work at West Michigan University in 1979. While in Kalamazoo, I read anything that I could lay my hands on in an attempt to understand both my own experience as a "non-white" South African and also social welfare in the context of a developing country marked by conflict and division. I was particularly interested in studying what opposition movements to apartheid had to say about social welfare in South Africa.

Thus, my journey began to make sense of welfare options in South Africa with an elective paper on social welfare and resistance to apartheid. Much of what I studied in social work in South Africa was

based on U.S. and British literature, which often did not neatly fit within South Africa's context. Oscar Lewis's "culture of poverty" theory did not make sense to me in a framework of structural inequality and political and economic exclusion (1969). It did not explain the realities of poverty that I saw around me in my everyday life growing up in a small rural town where poverty and racism were rife and disturbing. A question that emerged for me later as a student social worker was whether social case work or a social-treatment approach to social work was simply a "Band-Aid" and an attempt to appease and co-opt the poor. When the limits of micro-level approaches to bring about social change became evident to me, my interests shifted to social policy, community action and development, and macro practice.

These issues and concerns were debated among my peers in social work and the social sciences and among student activists in South Africa at the time. The uprisings at Soweto in 1976—in which thousands of Black African school children marched against Bantu education, reinforcing the marginal position of Africans in the economy and society—politicized students nationally and drew many students into opposition politics on campuses. I became involved in providing support to students and their families who were detained by the security police, and later in community struggles against apartheid in the 1980s.

The Soweto uprisings rekindled the spirit of resistance in the country. There was a resurgence of the anti-apartheid movements that were also prompted by the growing economic and political crises of the apartheid state and society in the 1980s. It became evident that the system was no longer economically and politically viable. The situation was worsened by the global oil crisis; international isolation of the state; and the growing legitimacy crisis of the state as grassroots groups in community, student, youth, civic, and women's organizations began to make demands on the state for improved living conditions, equal education, and food security, among others. Mass labor action in the 1970s provided the impetus for the rebuilding of a labor movement in the country.

Community Struggles Shape the Social Development Agenda

It was about this time that I became the editor of a community newspaper called *Grassroots*. Its goal was to educate, inform, and raise communities' critical consciousness of their local realities

and struggles. Limited coverage was given to issues of local concern in the mainstream media, and *Grassroots* aimed to address them. The newspaper was owned and operated by community organizations in the Western Cape, and soon other community newspapers emerged around the country.

In 1983, the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed, made up of an alliance of 600 grassroots organizations, trade unions, and religious organizations to oppose the government's plans to grant pseudo-political rights to Indians, Coloureds,² and urban Africans in a tricameral parliament. The UDF opposed these developments and led a mass resistance inside the country. The African National Congress (ANC) and liberation movements outside the country were engaged in an armed struggle against the state. The UDF was not formally aligned with the liberation movements, although some of its members were members of the ANC. Of significance are the struggles—regarding issues such as washing lines, electricity, affordable rent, decent wages, jobs, equal education, crèches, and health care—of the UDF and its affiliates in the 1980s that spoke to the needs of ordinary people for a better life. It was the combined power and strength of mass opposition movements in collaboration with the trade unions that propelled the social-development agenda in the country.

In addition to being one of the founding members of the UDF, I was also involved in a number of women's organizations as well as Concerned Social Workers (CSW). Concerned Social Workers was formed to oppose apartheid in the welfare field. In their chapter in a book about worldwide social-justice advocacy, Terry Sacco and Jeanette Schmid, two members of CSW, wrote of the role social workers play in opposing apartheid. Social workers contributed by drawing attention to the plight of both social workers who were detained and also of children who were arrested for antiapartheid activities and advocacy for social justice (Sacco & Schmid, 2014).

One of CSW's projects was to begin a dialogue in the profession about what a social-welfare system might look like in a non-racial and democratic South Africa. This work was part of my doctoral research on social-welfare policy options in a post-apartheid society. The research involved analyses of social welfare, development programs of opposition movements, and the implications for future welfare policy options in a democratic society.

My hypothesis was that progressive grassroots

²The term *Indians* refers to people of Indian origin, and the term *Coloureds* refers to people of mixed race.

organizations engaged in welfare programs provided alternative models of social welfare in their vision, values, goals, and methods of practice, and that this might be useful in informing future policies. When I embarked on this research in 1988, there was a state of emergency in the country and repression was widespread. Small pockets of researchers were quietly working on alternative policy research in different sectors of society, such as health and education. The research on welfare alternatives was disseminated via CSW and other professional associations at conferences, workshops, and small group discussions inside South Africa. It also reached activists outside the country.

In 1990, to South Africans' absolute disbelief, the government announced the unbanning of political organizations, which paved the way to a negotiated settlement, the adoption of a Constitution and a Bill of Rights, and a general election in 1994. The transition between 1990 and 1994 laid the foundation for the White Paper process. During this period, many grassroots and professional organizations conducted research to set and influence the policy agenda. This occurred in different fields. National forums were established in different social sectors to lobby and advocate for social policy reforms. I was mandated by a working group to produce a concept note on national sectorial forums and the need for such a forum in the welfare field. This led to the first inclusive National Welfare Summit held in 1993, which later culminated in the establishment of the National Welfare Forum. The Welfare Forum played a key role in the national-policy process that resulted in the White Paper.

At about the same time, my colleagues and I were involved in the National Children's Rights Committee (NCRC), which advocated for the inclusion of children's rights in the Bill of Rights. The NCRC was an alliance between children's organizations, researchers from different fields, and UNICEF that compiled a research report on the Situation of Children and Women in South Africa in 1993. One of the members of the NCRC, Brigitte Mabandla, also served on the constitutional negotiations committee that was under way at the time. She later became the Minister of Justice. In addition to helping to write and compile the report along with a group of eminent experts, I also published my doctoral research on welfare policy options at this time. This work provided the conceptual foundation of the approach to social development that informed the White Paper and was later published as a book (Patel 1992).

Following the national elections and the installation of the Mandela government, new policies in keeping with the Constitution and the Bill of Rights were developed in all spheres of society. In 1995, I was invited by the Minister and Deputy Minister for Social Welfare to lead and manage the process of developing the White Paper for Social Welfare. In 1996, I was appointed Director General of Social Welfare and served in that position until January 1998. The government recently appointed a ministerial committee to review the White Paper, with work slated to be complete in late 2015. I am a member of the current review committee, which is chaired by Professor Vivienne Taylor, a social worker and eminent antiapartheid activist.

White Paper Process

In view of the political contestation over the direction of social welfare in the Government of National Unity (including the former Afrikaner Nationalist Party) led by President Mandela, the national and provincial Ministers of social welfare reached an agreement regarding terms of reference for a participatory process of policy making. An overall structure made up of a national committee with eight technical committees was established with participation from the government—both national- and state-level representatives—including nonprofit and faith-based organizations, the National Welfare Forum, academics, and policy researchers. With this structure in place, I was then tasked with crafting all of its reports into a comprehensive policy framework that contained a set of principles, guidelines, proposals, and recommendations. This was published as an official Discussion Document, which was debated at a national consultative conference with members from more than 400 organizations in the country in attendance. Thereafter, the government published a Green Paper for public comment. Revisions were made based on the extensive input to the process, and substantive issues were debated in the national committee and with political principals. A key party in this debate was the National Treasury, which was concerned about the cost implications of the proposals.

The types of substantive issues that were debated included the following: (a) what the nature and content of the developmental approach entailed; (b) how it might be applied in practice; (c) concerns about how the past legacy of apartheid would be addressed (e.g., there were concerns about what would happen to elderly White people living in residential facilities for the elderly as 87% of the

national welfare budget was tied up in these types of services); (d) social workers were concerned about sharing their power with other social-service professions such as community development workers and child and youth care workers as well as paraprofessionals (e.g., auxiliary social workers); (e) various interest groups representing vulnerable populations (e.g., people with disabilities, children in need of specialized services) were anxious that their needs would not be accommodated; (f) some religious groups opposed proposals that outlawed corporal punishment in residential child-care facilities on grounds that the discipline of children was a divine right; and (g) the trade union movement argued for proposals for universal social security provisions.

Finally, the limits of the social-treatment approach to social work were also debated. For instance, the disability-rights movement was critical of the social work profession's medical approach and its failure to address social and structural barriers in meeting the needs and rights of this population. The policy proposed the integration of services and a better balance between remedial, preventive, promotive, and developmental interventions. One of the controversial issues was the child-maintenance system, which reached only a few thousand beneficiaries while denying access to child benefits for the majority of African children and families. The White Paper recommended that the policy be reformed.

In January 1996, I commenced my term of office as the first Director General (DG) of Social Welfare and Population Development in the Government of National Unity. Initially there were delays in the adoption of the White Paper in view of political differences between the ANC and the NP. Abe Williams, the Minister of the portfolio, was a Nationalist Party Minister, and he and his party were reluctant to appoint a DG who was an ANC supporter. However, once President Mandela and Deputy Minister of Welfare Geraldene Fraser Moleketi made their preference clear, I was appointed by the Cabinet as DG, paving the way for me to resume the process of getting the White Paper adopted by parliament. As DG, I had the positional authority to manage and negotiate the adoption of the policy through the parliamentary processes. My appointment also facilitated the process with which I was personally involved as well as in the drafting of the policy. Because I was familiar with all aspects of the document including the various submissions from external and governmental stakeholders, I could speak directly to every clause in the document when

queries were raised. This involved interactions with the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee of Social Welfare, which is a multi-party structure. Public hearings and side meetings were held with different political parties to discuss their concerns about the policy. After much debate and more revisions, the policy was adopted in 1997, two years after the process was formally started.

The final White Paper that was adopted by parliament in 1997 was a negotiated document with many compromises. For instance, terms such as *self-reliance* crept into the document and have been interpreted in different ways. Policy proposals with significant fiscal implications were removed and replaced with recommendations for further policy proposals and research. The language of fiscal restraint also emerged in the document as the treasury began to take a more cautious approach because the financial implications of previous White Papers had not been considered before being adopted. The welfare policy lagged behind other policies that were adopted early on in the transition. South Africa also had a huge debt at the time and was emerging from negative economic growth rates over two decades. In 1998, the government adopted a voluntary structural adjustment program that was severely criticized as a retreat from its earlier social goals. However, policy proposals to develop and implement child-support grants were accepted in 1997 and implemented in 1998. In January 1998, I left the government three years before my contract expired. The building blocks had been laid, and others needed to take the process forward.

Implementation of the White Paper for Welfare

The White Paper for Welfare accomplished a number of social welfare goals (Patel 2005). These include the expansion of social protection (i.e., cash transfers) between 1994 and 2014. Cash transfers to older persons, people with disabilities, and children now reach close to 40% of the poor. It is now acknowledged to be one of the country's most effective poverty-reduction programs and has significant effects on reducing inequality. Social protection is fully publicly funded and remains one of South Africa's greatest achievements in the implementation of developmental welfare.

However, progress in implementing welfare services was less impressive. Underfunding of welfare services continued, and there was the crowding out of welfare services to expand social assistance.

The partnership model of service delivery between government and nonprofit organizations (NPOs) remains contested as NPOs are underfunded. The courts have also ruled against the government and have cautioned against the abrogation of state responsibility for welfare services, which is a constitutional obligation (Patel, 2012).

The shift from a social-treatment approach to social development did not occur. A number of factors have been identified, such as different interpretations, about what the approach entailed conceptually. A lack of institutional capacity to implement the policy remains a key issue, along with resistance to change and a lack of clear direction about how to implement the developmental approach (Patel & Hochfeld, 2013).

Lessons Learned throughout This Process

A range of factors pertaining to policy implementation have had a negative impact on welfare-service delivery and the scaling-up effects of the developmental approach to social welfare and social work. This resulted in uneven implementation of the various components of the policy (Patel 2005).

- There is the growing realization in the welfare field and among citizens in general that we can develop the most visionary policies, but if insufficient attention is paid to policy implementation, the policy will never become more than a good idea.
- Institutions, institutional arrangements, and people with the right knowledge and skills are crucial.
- Inadequate financial and fiscal policies to support welfare-service delivery by both the government and NPOs are major obstacles in implementation.
- Governmental social-development departments in South Africa are staffed largely by social-work practitioners who find it difficult to bridge the micro-macro divide.
- Crossing disciplinary boundaries for social workers in the real world of policy making and practice does not come easily.
- Bringing about change on the scale required to give effect to the White Paper required large-scale change and management interventions across the government, NPOs, professional organizations, and training institutions. This was not implemented and much resistance to the new direction in social welfare was encountered (Patel, Schmid, & Hochfeld, 2012).

- Transformational leaders are needed across governments, and NPOs are crucial to drive a change agenda.
- Limited knowledge and skills exist in evidence-based policy making, monitoring, and evaluating of social development policies and programs.
- Social-policy training of social workers needs to take greater account of these issues.

Despite these challenges, much has been achieved in setting a new path for social welfare in line with the country's constitutional vision in the policy and legislative domain. Much has also been done to set the standards for the delivery of developmental welfare programs and social-work education. A major challenge for the future is to grow and strengthen the developmental approach to social welfare conceptually and to continue growing innovation- and evidence-based social development practice. These good practice lessons will not only be valuable in the South African context, but also may provide guidance for social work and social development in both developing- and developed-country contexts.

Concluding Remarks and Acknowledgments

I have told the story of the White Paper in various published works before, but I have not inserted myself into it until now. This is a new experience for me. In telling the story, I have shared what role I believe I played in this process. This is not to diminish the large and incredible role that many other people played in the struggle for justice, in the transition period, and in shaping welfare policy. I wish to acknowledge them all: CSW, a formidable force in this process; fellow activists in the UDF and the women's movement in the 1980s; my colleagues in the Department of Social Welfare in the government who supported the White Paper process, including members of the technical and management committees; and the many individuals and organizations who shared their ideas with us. Like many South Africans, I was a witness to what happened. The reality of apartheid affected me from birth. I was a participant in the events that I have described.

It was with a heavy heart that I left the government in early 1998. I wondered whether I could have handled the conflicting roles between politicians and administrators differently, as my departure had a significant impact on what followed. But over the years, I also learned that these processes

are larger than individuals and that the policy implementation process needed to find its own path.

After I left the government, I spent four years as Deputy Vice Chancellor and Vice Principal of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, which was a good cooling-off period for me. Since 2002, I have been at the University of Johannesburg as a social-work educator and a researcher. Now, I am involved in studying the implementation of the White Paper among other contemporary social-development issues in a changing global and regional context. Last year, I accepted a position on a Ministerial Committee, chaired by Professor Vivienne Taylor, to review the White Paper for welfare. Only time will tell how this will unfold.

I believe the South African story of developing and implementing a welfare policy remains an inspiring one. Now I worry about new issues such as corruption in government, institutions not working for poor people, and how to promote youth employability, among others. When in doubt about how to proceed, I return to an early lesson that I learned in my doctoral research: Learning from below, from what people are actually doing in practice, can provide powerful insights for how to find solutions to complex social issues.

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