

Title

Community work in an industrial setting: the case of National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ)

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Abstract

Most of the labour laws in Zimbabwe mainly focus on regulating relationships between the employer and employee with focus being on regulating the employment contract, conditions of service and grievance handling procedures. Yet incidences of the employee's welfare and the attendant total transformation and development of the employee are hardly mentioned in the current labour laws, save for situations when the employee is short-changed in terms of his or her remuneration by seeking

recourse to the labour courts. In this article, the role of social work in an industrial setting is looked at in terms of policy processes and considerations towards practices that enable employees to realize their full potential. Social work practice at the National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ) is used as a case example as to how community development can strengthen employees and their families' capacities towards social transformation and change to their standards of living.

Key words

employment, community work, industrial setting, labour, National Railways of Zimbabwe, social development, social work

Introduction

Most of the labour laws in Zimbabwe mainly focus on regulating relationships between the employer and employee with focus being on regulating the employment contract, conditions of service and grievance handling procedures. Yet incidences of the employee's welfare and the attendant total transformation and development of the employee are hardly mentioned in the current labour laws, save for situations when the employee is short-changed in terms of his or her remuneration by seeking recourse to the labour courts. In this article, the role of social work in an industrial setting is looked at in terms of policy processes and considerations towards practices that enable employees to realize their full potential. Social work practice at the National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ) is used as a case example as to how community development can strengthen employees and their families' capacities towards social transformation and change to their standards of living.

Social development

According to Kaseke (2001) and Dominelli (1997) social development has a varied and diverse meanings, with some contending that social development is about modernization, whilst others are of the view that social development is all about investing in people. As social workers we have to define social development as a dynamic way of organizing resources and human interactions so as to create opportunities through which the potential of all peoples individually or collectively – can be developed in full. Social development is about putting people first on a worldwide scale (Dominelli, 1997). In other words, social development seeks to liberate people from want and the scourge of underdevelopment which features more prominently on the planet's landscape. Poverty, hunger, unemployment, conflict and the attendant wars and environmental degradation are features of the underdevelopment that social workers must deal with (Mupedziswa and Ntseane, 2013). For instance, in the developed countries, most counties which have developed welfare state programmes have drastically reduced expenditure on welfare provisions, with such programmes being described as parasitical and unproductive. In developing countries, the whittling away of social services provisions has been central to the government's implementation of the structural adjustment programmes, advocated by the International Monetary Fund (1999) and the World Bank (1998). As a result, the declining expenditure in both developed and developing countries in the provision of social welfare services has exacted a terrible toll on the generality of the population with high incidences of unemployment rising crime and increased poverty being recorded in both developed and developing countries.

The role of social work in community development

The question that comes to mind then is that given the devastating effects of structural adjustment policies in both developed and developing countries, what would be social workers best method of intervention in order to alleviate the level of suffering that the ordinary people who are the erstwhile beneficiaries of welfare state programmes are experiencing? In this instance, social workers are charged as professionals with the task to develop people's well-being on both personal and collective levels. In any case, it is most social worker's belief that social work should make life easier for people by integrating them into society's institutions and social structures, though controversy still exists as to how this should be achieved with some adopting the maintenance approach whilst others particularly in the Latin America where Paulo Freire's influence has been upper-most, adopting the liberationist approach (Freire, 1993). It is the later approach that the social work practice at the National Railways of Zimbabwe is premised on and has been adopted as the standard practice of community work amongst the railway community. Reference will be made later to this practice and approach later in the article.

Those adopting the maintenance approach seek to help people adjust to the prevailing conditions and situations. Yet the liberationist perspective seeks to challenge the status quo and develop a progressive alternative to the existing order. It is my submission that a liberationist alternative is most relevant to social work practice as it seeks to enable people to redefine their position and to change the social order for the betterment of humankind. This approach means challenging the existing social relationships, and in the process changing the existing distribution of power and resources. The social worker thus becomes an enabler or a catalyst, involved in mobilizing people and advocating for social transformation.

Social workers need to be knowledgeable to be able to empower the people they serve (Council of Social Workers Zimbabwe, 2010). Social workers also need to re-interpret their professionalism and turn into well informed activist who cares about the communities they serve, deeply rooted in the ethos of truly serving the people. It becomes the inalienable duty of social workers to highlight, name and identify the plight of disenfranchised people and to demand that underdeveloped people's situations be substantially improved.

Community work at the NRZ

The structural adjustment programmes that were adopted by government at the Bretton Woods institutions prescription for economic growth, saw a great number of social policies and welfare provisions being subordinated to economic exigencies. At the same time the removal of subsidies and the drastic whittling down of government funded social services programs, including commercialization and outright privatization of state enterprises and parastatals was one of the major conditions of the supposed successful implementation of the structural adjustment programme.

The NRZ was not spared either. From a peak period of a 24 000 workforce to the current 6 000 plus (NRZ, 2015). The NRZ was equally affected, first by reducing the size of the work force; complete removal of subsidies and the commercialization that saw the NRZ competing with other road users who are indirectly subsidized by government as the government is directly responsible for road maintenance. Whereas the NRZ is solely responsible for maintenance of infrastructure without government subsidies, with most such challenges of an operational nature being experienced by the Railways having a negative effect and impact on employee's welfare and their dependence.

The predominant residual social welfare practice that characterized Railway Welfare Programmes, had to be drastically curtailed due to poor funding. Whereas the welfare policies were premised on the from the cradle to the grave principle, where employees would receive food rations, to school fees and a comprehensive medical cover, the advent of the Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP) saw the Railway curtailing most, if not all of its welfare programmes and policies.

The social work practice had to shift from the residual approach to the developmentalist approach as the thrust now was to reorient social work practice to promote development through mass participation and self-reliance amongst the railway community. The community work programmes are directed towards employees and in most cases their dependencies such as spouses' children and other dependencies.

Of course, residual case work always remains the pillar and building block for creating viable communities that form the basis of our community developing programmes such as economic empowerment programmes, women's club, recreational clubs, sports development, income generation projects, and community development in general which include capacity building, and indigenization and counselling.

Conclusion

A new vision of community work must be inculcated in social work practice where social development ought to be about meeting human needs in both urban and the rural areas. Such a vision of social development should be rooted in making certain that rights such as the basic necessities of life i.e. food, clothing, water, are accessible to every individual on this planet regardless of who they are. NRZ has in this regard succeeded in providing a seamless comprehensive social welfare service programme deeply rooted in the ethos of self-reliance. Social work practice on the NRZ has also been transformed through the practice of what somebody referred to as life sustaining social development, with social workers playing the role of facilitators, resource persons and quality controllers through the various empowerment programmes alluded to earlier on. In this instance social development practice and community work should therefore be premised the on desire to see translation of abstract notions of social development into concrete actions as evidenced by the various social work programmes that are practiced on the NRZ again as alluded to earlier on. Community work should be regarded as the midwife in the process of bring about social change, social justice and social equity and as the facilitator of forging links between individuals, communities and nations for the realization of both individual and collective aspirations.

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