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Social Work and Sustainable Development: A Postmodern Community Development Framework

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In 2002, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, world leaders faced strong skepticism and a cry from the world for more progress and results towards a more humane world. It is no secret that progress in implementing sustainable development has been extremely disappointing since the 1992 Earth Summit, with poverty deepening and environmental degradation worsening (United Nations, 2002). Under heavy pressure, world leaders pledged their commitment to sustainable development, while recognizing that poverty remained a major issue, "the deep fault line that divides human society between the rich and the poor and the ever-increasing gap between the developed and developing worlds pose a major threat to global prosperity, security and stability" (Johannesburg Declaration, 2003, p.2).

However, progress continues to be slow, over thirty years have passed since the first Earth Summit was held in Stockholm in 1972; millions of dollars have been spent in sustainable development programs; several agreements and declarations have been signed; yet poverty continues to hold families and children around the world hostage as environmental degradation continues to get worse (Commission on Sustainable Development, 2007). New approaches to poverty eradication and environmental preservation are being called for, and the social work profession must engage in this discussion and provide alternatives to a more humane world. Social Work as a profession has been concerned with poverty and the environment since its inception. According to the social work code of ethics (1999), the primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people. It further states that "fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living" (NASW, 1999 what is the page number).

In this article, the author uses the postmodern view to examine possible causes of poverty, and propose alternatives to current sustainable development projects. The scope of this article does not allow for an in-depth discussion of postmodernism. As such, the author has intentionally elected to provide a brief discussion of postmodernism and will focus on two key aspects, knowledge production and the displacement of the subject, while examining the postmodern view of poverty to provide the context for the proposed framework. The author develops an argument for a new approach to sustainable development based on (a) decentering the poverty expert, (b) incorporating substantive knowledge from local community members, and (c) understanding current societal structural changes, combined with social work's approach to community development and focusing on the development of human capabilities. A brief discussion regarding postmodernism and poverty follows next.

What is postmodernism?

Postmodernism can be understood in two distinct ways: as object, ontology, and as attitude, epistemology (Harvey, 1989; Lyotard, 1984; Yapa, 1996). Yapa (1996) described the object as the way people see the world and how it has changed over the last 25 years. As object postmodernism is concerned with the history and structural developments, which have taken place since the late 1950's with the completion of Europe's reconstruction (Brown, 1992, Harvey, 1989, Jameson, 1991; Lyotard, 1984). As attitude postmodernism is concerned with the theoretical and representational mood of society, it is the how we know what we know, in other words, it is the attainment and production of knowledge (Lyotard, 1984; Yapa, 1996).

Jameson (1991) described postmodernism as a cultural expression of the late capitalism, which he contends is the third stage of capitalism. This stage started in the late 1950's with the completion of Europe's reconstruction from the Second World War and the end of the United States' global domination (Brown, 1992, Harvey, 1989, Jameson, 1991; Lyotard, 1984), which coupled with new technologies and the ever growing capital mobility have given rise to this new stage that authors have called late capitalism (Jameson, 1991), post-industrial (Lyotard, 1984), post-fordist (Brown, 1992) and postmodernism (Harvey, 1989, Jameson, 1991; Lyotard, 1984). Jameson (1991) contends that postmodernism involves the cultural expressions – architecture, arts, media and so on – of this third stage of capitalism. These expressions not only represent a break and rupture from the modern society, but they symbolize a new period in history, which many call postmodernism (Harvey, 1989; Jameson, 1991; Lyotard, 1984). The postmodern view of poverty is examined next.

Postmodernism and Poverty

To fully comprehend the postmodern view of poverty, it is important to understand both structural and epistemological changes impacting societies (Harvey, 1989, Jameson, 1991; Lyotard, 1984). Yapa (1996), contended that "postmodern attitudes raise important questions about the nature of signs, representation, language, power, and policy" (p. 708), choosing to focus on epistemological aspects giving rise to poverty. Brown (1992), on the other hand, elected to consider "structural changes" which he called the "postmodern drift of capitalism". Brown (1992) contended that the high technology revolution has contributed to the constitution of a new economic order based on the free market global economy, which produces "both greater insecurity and greater means for self-expression" (p. 383) leading to greater income disparities around the world.

Postmodernism contends that "the material deprivation experienced by the poor is a form of socially constructed scarcity" (Yapa, 1996, p.707). In modern economics, scarcity has been defined as the distribution of scarce resources among unlimited wants (Yapa, 1996). While scarcity is seen to be socially specific, unlimited wants are seen to be socially constructed (Yapa, 1996). Yapa (1996) proposed the "nexus of production relations" to provide a better understanding of the causes of poverty. In this nexus, production is seen to be constructed within the discursive and non-discursive relations among six key elements – academic, ecological, technical, political, social and cultural (Yapa, 1996). These "relations act and react upon each other constantly to maintain a dynamic system of mutually constituted elements" (Yapa, 1996, p.709). The socially constructed scarcity that affects the poor in developing countries is, thus, seen as a direct result of economic development (Yapa, 1996).

Furthermore, current development strategies contribute to the creation of scarcity further disempowering the poor by ignoring the fact that outside forces also contribute to poverty, and

that poverty is not created and maintained within impoverished communities only (Yapa, 1996). Therefore, the answers to poverty require substantive action at multiple sites within the nexus of production at a variety of levels (Yapa, 1996). "By decentering the poverty expert as subject of the discourse, we mobilize the resources of a large number of other agents of change who have substantive knowledge of how scarcity is constructed in their fields of experience" (Yapa, 1996, p. 722). This mobilization contributes to the design of more effective development strategies.

Conversely, Brown (1992) has argued that the high technology revolution has fostered an "increasingly integrated, self-regulating, competitive, and highly globalized world market system" (p. 384). With this increasingly globalized market system, American businesses watched their previously held dominance disappear (Brown, 1992; Jameson, 1991). To increase its competitiveness, many American businesses have relocated to countries that offer better business opportunities with lower-wages, abundance in natural resources, and less government oversight (Brown, 1992). While this trend has led to higher levels of unemployment in the United States, it has also had disastrous consequences to local communities and natural resources (Brown, 1992). National and local governments no longer have control over their own land, which has led to growing depletion of local resources and exacerbation of income inequalities where the poor continue to grow poorer (Brown, 1992). The proposed sustainable development framework which considers both structural and epistemological factors of postmodernism is presented next.

Sustainable Development: A Postmodern Community Development Framework

The social work approach to community development presents an alternative approach to current poverty eradication efforts, which have had mediocre results at best. However, for community members to fully engage and benefit from community development activities, human capabilities such as well nourishment, ability to read and write, and ability to escape avoidable mortality and disease, must be further developed (Anand & Sen, 2000). Human capabilities are often seen within the larger concept of human development. Human development, in turn is frequently defended as a goal in of itself as it directly "enhances the capacity of people to lead worthwhile lives" (Anand & Sen, 2000, p. 2038). By focusing on the development of human capabilities social workers can increase people's abilities to do things (Sen, 1999), and thus, expand the means for people to engage in, and benefit from sustainable development activities. For instance, in some Asian countries social workers have mobilized communities to create day care centers which not only educate children but improve their nutritional standards leading to a healthier more educated community that, in turn, is able to benefit from development strategies (Midgley, 1996).

Community development offers an approach to poverty eradication, which is also conducive with the postmodern view of decentering the practitioner as the poverty expert and involving substantive knowledge from local community members and or indigenous people. According to John Friedman (cited in Spruill, Kenney & Kaplan, 2001), the community development approach "places the emphasis on autonomy in the decision making of territorially organized communities, local self-reliance (but not autarchy), direct (participatory) democracy, and experiential social learning" (p. 105). Hall (1996) highlighted how social workers assisted, identified and harnessed substantive knowledge from local community members to help the Mamiraua community in the Brazilian Amazon develop and implement a plan to reconcile the conservation of Mamiraua's rich biodiversity with the livelihood needs of its local population. This project is now considered a success example of sustainable development projects that

promote economic development, environmental conservation, and protects the rights and needs of local indigenous groups (Röper, 2000).

Spruill, Kenney, and Kaplan (2001) further argued that a systems approach, which takes into account other communities or systems within which the community is embedded or it is interdependent, provides a more realistic method to further the process of social learning and community interaction. A systems approach can foster the dissemination of information, and thus promote the sharing of knowledge among and within systems and or communities, which then leads to a decrease in knowledge gaps that have hindered development for years (Spruill, Kenney, & Kaplan, 2001). The Mamiraua project, for example, integrated knowledge from communities throughout the Brazilian Amazon, which participated in the project in conjunction with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and State and National government officials allowing for a greater sharing of knowledge among local Amazon communities leading to a more effective management plan (Hall, 1996; Röper, 2000). As such, strategies that involve the local community and focus on developing their capabilities, which in turn may lead to the production and dissemination of new knowledge as well as to the empowerment of local communities to become active agents of change themselves, may be an alternative to current programs that continue to focus on remedial and market- driven strategies (Midgley, 1996).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Sustainable development aims to promote development, which meets the needs of the present generation while guaranteeing that the needs of the future generations will also be met (United Nations, 2003). Today, the needs of the present generation are not being met, and this is evident by the growing number of people suffering from poverty all around the world (Commission on Sustainable Development, 2007). Social workers play a vital role in engaging communities in activities that promote human capital, mobilizing community members to create and enhance social capital, and fostering opportunities for low-income and special needs groups to engage in productive employment and self-employment activities (Midgley, 1996).
These projects place emphasis on the autonomy in the decision making of communities, local self-reliance, participatory democracy, and experiential social learning (Hall, 1996; Röper, 2000; Spruill, Kenney & Kaplan, 2001). Therefore, sustainable development programs should engage in economic and human development activities focusing on the development of human capabilities while promoting environmental preservation, within the framework of decentering the practitioner/scientist as the poverty expert and involving substantive knowledge from local community members. Furthermore, by developing human capabilities and involving substantive knowledge from local community members, sustainable development programs will empower local communities to make decisions as to the best use of local natural resources to promote economic development and ensure environmental preservation. Finally, if we do not address poverty issues now our generation will be sustaining a world of poverty and environmental degradation for generations to come.

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