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The Marginalization of Social Welfare in Developing Countries: The Relevance of Theories of Social Policy Development

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Social welfare development has been marginalized in many developing countries. This study examines the social policies of developing countries and refers to four major theories of social policy development (social conscience, modernization, dependency and diffusion) to see if they offer an explanation of the phenomenon. It is argued that dependency theory and diffusion theory provide better interpretations than the other two theories. The paper shows how theories of social policy have international relevance in explaining current trends in social welfare.

Until recently, the debates on social policy have focused exclusively on the advanced industrial countries and have disregarded events in developing countries. While the welfare state has been subjected to critical appraisal, the underdevelopment of social welfare in the Third World is often taken for granted. Parallel to this, there is great optimism that lessons drawn from the advanced industrial nations will explain social policy development in the Third World. Not surprisingly, studies of social welfare in developing countries are limited. This is undesirable in view of the fact that the majority of the world's nations are neglected by social policy analysis. The belief in the universality of western experiences is also unfounded. The aim of this paper is to study the marginalization of social welfare in developing countries and account for it using four major theories of social policy development.

The Marginalization of Social Welfare

There have been several periods in the post-war history of social policy in the developing countries. There has been a strategy

of economic growth; a concern over equity and redistribution; the basic needs approach; and the revival of economic growth strategy (Hofferbert, 1990; Midgley 1994b; Synder & Tadesse, 1995). The main thrust of development theory from the end of the Second World War until well into the 1960s focused on the dynamics of national income growth, often measured by change in GNP per capita over some specified period of time. Also known as trickle-down theory, development policy focused on infrastructural development in the expectation that benefits would flow to the population of developing countries. In social welfare, remedial social services sought to tackle pressing social problems (Hardiman & Midgley, 1989). There was a strong conviction that planning would raise incomes through economic growth and that government intervention to meet social needs was unnecessary. However, improved data and research on income redistribution did not support the predictions of income growth policy (Goulet, 1977; Adelman & Morris, 1984). Evans (1979) pointed out that even the 'Brazilian growth miracle' of the 1960s did not reduce inequality of income.

Many developing countries began to expand social welfare programs in the face of massive social needs in the 1950s. Their intervention was supported by the international organizations. For example, the United Nations promoted a remedial conception of social welfare in developing nations in the 1950s (Midgley, 1981). By the early 1970s, concern over the issues of equity and redistribution led to the adoption of the basic needs strategy which focused on the social conditions of the poorest people in the poorer countries (Stewart, 1989). The International Labour Organization first adopted the basic needs approach to development in 1976, which drew public awareness of social welfare objectives in economic development (Midgley, 1994b). This strategy was backed up by the theory of trickle-up which held that meeting the basic needs of the poorest will stimulate economic growth. The basic needs approach required that more social welfare services be extended to the poor.

However, a greater concern for social conditions did not mean that social welfare development in developing countries was comprehensive. In many instances, the opposite was the case. This situation was aggravated in the 1980s when there was inter-

national concern over the ability of governments to meet the escalating costs of welfare programs. In response to recurrent economic problems, many developing countries substantially reduced the level of their financial commitments to the human services (Estes, 1988). The rise of the New Right in the United States and Britain at this time questioned government intervention in social planning (Glennister & Midgley, 1991). A staunch follower of this philosophy is the International Monetary Fund which put a brake on social development. It was able to force many debt-ridden developing countries to adopt stringent structural adjustment policies and impose severe cuts to social programs (Stewart, 1992; Midgley, 1994b; Aslanbeigui et al., 1994). Privatization, deregulation and retrenchment of the public sector became new policy prescriptions (Snyder & Tadesse, 1995).

However, some developing countries are not averse to social spending. This is illustrated by the fact that the poorest developing countries reported a gain of 33 percent in public spending in the 1980s (Estes, 1988). There are some promising signs of a resurgence of social development and a growing determination to fight the adverse impact of the New Right in the developing world (Midgley, 1995). Recent analyses have revealed that some Asian countries, such as Jordan, South Korea and Singapore continue to invest in social programs, which goes against the trend of cuts in social spending (Midgley, 1986, 1992). The extent of state intervention in social development in Asian countries has attracted much attention and warrants further study since they are an exception to the world-wide trend of welfare retreat.

The case of East Asian Newly Industrializing Countries (NICs) is interesting. Economic growth rates in these countries have been far higher and their spending far lower than other countries with similar level of economic development. Their social welfare programs are extensive and poverty rates continue to decline. In most other developing countries, there has been a negligible reduction in the incidence of poverty in the 1980s (World Bank, 1992). Recently, indicators on income distribution and poverty alleviation in these countries have shown a disturbing trend. While most East Asia countries improved their relative income distributions immediately following the transition to export-led growth, income inequality in the 1980s increased

again when Gini coefficients in Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong were above or near their levels of the mid-1960s (Haggard, 1990).

Despite relatively strong statist intervention in these Asian countries, a number of problems remain. These include an unevenness in social development; haphazard and incremental development; urban bias; and resource inadequacy. Midgley (1994b) draws attention to the phenomenon of 'distorted development' which has plagued many developing and industrial countries. This is manifested in the coexistence of material prosperity and widespread poverty and inequality. Distorted development continues to be a major problem despite economic growth and welfare expenditure. Dasgupta (1978) reaches a pessimistic conclusion in his analysis of this problem. He concludes that development has actually benefited only a handful of people. Development has led to the creation of inequality by forcing the poor to carry the major burden of industrial growth.

These trends confirm that social welfare programs are not well developed in the developing countries (Estes, 1988; Tracy, 1991; Midgley, 1981, 1984a,b, 1992). Even where welfare programs do exist, they tend to be in an early stage of development. A comparatively small percentage of the population is covered by programs and services. Social welfare in the developing countries faces other problems as well. Many social programs tend to be financed by a combination of employer and employee contributions. The role of the governments in contributing to the financial support of public sector welfare programs tends to be minimal and highly particularized (Jimenez, 1987; Tracy, 1991). The most recurrent gap in social security is the lack of income protection during periods of unemployment, disability, old age and sickness. Few developing countries have instituted family allowance schemes. However, out of necessity and international pressures, an increasing number of developing countries are providing some level of support to workers who experience injuries while working. The provision of social welfare services has never been more than a very small part of overall economic development planning (Conyers, 1982). Such a low level of social welfare development in the developing countries leads to the conclusion that social welfare is marginalized.

The marginalization of social welfare is manifested in various ways. Spending by Third World governments on social welfare is meagre to modest. The ministry of social welfare is often poorly staffed and has poorly paid staff. There is low morale and high turnover (and burnout) among social workers. Major decisions on welfare are often made by bureaucrats and politicians while social welfare staff remain peripheral to decision-making processes. People in many developing countries continue to see social welfare as charity (Midgley, 1981). The conservative onslaught against the welfare state in the advanced capitalist countries reinforces the anti-welfare ideology prevalent in some developing countries.

Parallel to the marginalization of social welfare in the developing nations is the marginalization of social work. For a long time, social work education in developing nations has been hampered by inefficient resources and lack of support from the governments. Generally, the social work profession has low status. The relatively weak knowledge base of social work and the lack of culturally appropriate intervention models aggravates the problem. Social work lacks a systematic empirical validation of its practice strategies. Ongoing evaluations of the effectiveness of social work interventions is often missing (Hokenstad, Khinduka & Midgley, 1992). In sum, the marginalization of social welfare remains a critical problem in the developing world.

The concept of marginalization is used by neo-Marxists to describe the situation where “. . . national economic progress [in many developing countries], is accompanied by the exclusion of large sections of the population from economic life.” (Hoogvelt, 1984). The poor are “marginalized” in relation to national economic development and condemned to an existence of absolute poverty. By analogy, social welfare in the developing countries has been in a comparable state of ‘marginalization’ in relation to national economic development. Often social welfare is reduced drastically in times of economic stagnation but is only increased slightly in times of economic prosperity. The concept of marginalization implies a certain functionality. Social welfare is functional to the post-colonial capitalist society because it creates a safety net for the poor, which permits the capitalist economy to run without threat of social instability. The indispensability of social

welfare to capitalist societies is noted by many neo-Marxists. They contend that even in advanced capitalist countries, it is difficult to dismantle welfare states since they are an efficient conflict-reducing mechanism (Offe, 1984).

Major Theories of Social Policy Development

Social Conscience Theory

There are many theories which purport to explain the development of social welfare in developing countries. One of the earliest is the social conscience theory which maintains that social policy manifests, through the agency of the state, the love that altruistic people have for each other. Changes in social policy result from two benevolent forces: first, a widening and deepening sense of social obligation, and secondly, an increase in society's knowledge of need. Such changes are cumulative, and policy evolves constantly in the direction of greater generosity. Social improvements are irreversible and contemporary social services are the highest historical expression of social altruism. While present services were incomplete and defective, the central problems of social welfare have been solved (Baker, 1979; Higgins, 1981).

Social conscience theory has been applied to developing countries to foster a hope for betterment. Using this approach, several scholars have claimed that the governments of the newly independent countries fostered the growth of modern social services because they are an expression of society's deeply instinctive humanitarianism (Muzumdar, 1964; Aptekar, 1965; Stein, 1976).

Modernization Theory

This school of thought views developing countries as social systems undergoing social change consequent upon the impact of western/technological institutions. Modernization is the process whereby the developing societies become more developed. The theory is based on a number of analyses of development using various models such as Rosenstein-Rodan's (1943) theory of the 'big push' toward industrialization and Nurkse's (1976) model of balanced growth. A well-known conceptualization of the process is given by Rostow (1960) who views development as a linear process of economic growth passing through five stages ranging

from the 'traditional' to the 'mass consumption' society. He claims that economic growth raises incomes and improves levels of welfare in a society. Government intervention to meet social needs should be kept to a minimum. Rooted in a structural-functional view of society, modernization theory regards social programs as a response to the needs and problems arising from structural changes in the economy.

Closely allied with modernization theory is the industrialization-convergence hypothesis which, in its simplest form, posits that the process of industrial modernization creates unique social needs and problems which result inevitably in the creation of modern social services (Wilensky & Lebeaux, 1965). Modern social welfare developed in industrial societies to substitute for the functions of kinship, community, and religious organizations in meeting human needs. The theory suggests that all advanced societies have accepted the principles of welfare statism. The end-of-ideology thesis of modernization theory further contends that there is a consensus among intellectuals on political issues. These include the acceptance of a welfare state; the desirability of decentralized power; a system of mixed economy; and political pluralism. Developing nations will, it is argued, undergo the same process.

Dependency Theory

Neo-Marxists challenged modernization theory and were very influential in development circles in the 1960s (Harrison, 1988). They argued that development and underdevelopment were essentially different aspects of the same economic processes. The former had occurred only by increasing the latter. Development is no longer an option for the Third World. The very existence of the world capitalist system means that the development potential of underdeveloped countries is effectively blocked. The capitalist world system is created when the Western European nations developed trading links with the non-European countries, gradually incorporating the rest of the world, in stages, into an international system or exchange. The world has since been divided into two main groups of nations. On one hand, there are those who have economic power. They are the 'developed', the 'center' or the 'metropolises'. On the other hand, the 'underdeveloped',

'periphery' or the 'satellites' lack economic and political power. The crux of this theory is the dialectic of 'metropolis-satellite' relations. Frank (1967) argued that these relations are essentially exploitative since they involve the transfer of surplus from the poorest peasants and urban workers to the landlords, merchants, and petty industrialists and then to the elites in the national centers of wealth in developing countries and finally to the international centers of world capitalism. Colonization resulted not only in the subjugation of indigenous institutions but in their transformation and integration into the world capitalist system. As Hoogvelt (1986) puts it, "the colony had to feed, educate and care for the people in order to proletarianize them" (p.111).

Diffusion Theory

Proponents of diffusion theory (MacPherson, 1982; Moser, 1989; Todaro, 1994; Midgley, 1984a, 1984b, 1993, 1994b) have sought to explain the growth of welfare in developing countries in terms of international influences. Diffusion is defined as "the development of social welfare institutions through the exchange of information and views between policy makers or to the adoption of the welfare policies or practices of one country by policy makers in another." (Midgley, 1984a, p.170) Some exogenous factors as colonialism, dependency, and the importation of western welfare institutions and ideas were identified as integral to this dynamic. The theory assumed post-independence links between the developing countries and their former colonial rulers and the role of influences from the latter on the former. The developing countries are seen as replicating the institutions and values of the former colonial powers. This led to the inappropriate adoption of Western welfare systems (like social insurance systems which, as Midgley, (1984c) pointed out, only benefit a handful of industrial workers in the urban sector). Thus diffusion was not defined by the proponents of this theory as a benevolent process.

Diffusion theory relies on the 'false paradigm model' in development economics to explain the inappropriateness of western influence (Todaro, 1994). It attributes Third World underdevelopment to faulty and inappropriate advice provided by well-meaning but often uninformed international 'expert' advisors from the industrial countries, consulting agencies and multi-

national donor organizations. These experts offered sophisticated concepts, elegant theoretical structures, and complex econometric models of development that often led to the adoption of inappropriate or simply incorrect policies.

A Critique of the Major Theories

The four theories of social policy development reviewed here have been popular at different times in the history of developing societies. Social conscience theory was held by missionaries, social workers and some enlightened officials in the mid-twentieth century. Modernization theory became important after the Second World War when the former colonies became independent. In the late 1960s, when many of developing countries were struggling in the face of global adversity, neo-Marxist dependency theory gained popularity. In early 1980s diffusion theory was used to explain the underdevelopment of social welfare in post colonial societies, emphasizing the irrelevance and inappropriateness of many imported welfare ideas and institutions. Both social conscience and modernization theory have promised a future golden age for the developing societies in which social welfare will inevitably result from altruism and economic growth. The theories of dependency and diffusion present a different picture for the developing societies. However, they do so for different reasons. Dependency theory predicts continued impoverishment for many countries. Diffusion theory suggests that the imposition of an alien welfare system will harm social welfare. Diffusion theory shares a pessimistic view with dependency theory because diffusion, as Midgley (1984a) convincingly argues, is part of a "more extensive and fundamental problem of dependency in the modern world system." (p.182)

These theories have been criticized. Social conscience theory is held to be "a brand of well-meaning ethnocentrism" and there is no strong evidence to support it (Higgins, 1981). Other factors like political processes, economic development and class interests are not taken into account in the theory. The assumption of good-will underlying social action is particularly suspect. There is no logical necessity that good-will will drive public policy. Modernization theory is criticized for its ethnocentrism (Goldthorpe,

1984; Midgley, 1984b), its ideological mask camouflaging the imperialist nature of western capitalism (Hoogvelt, 1986), and its incorrect prediction of the inevitability of development in the Third World (Hardiman & Midgley, 1989). Goldthorpe (1984) was especially critical of the theory for its overemphasis on the 'logic of industrialism' and its failure to take into account conflicting values and ideologies in determining the direction in which different industrial societies have developed.

Dependency theory fails to offer concrete policy options for developing countries. Its pessimistic outlook is not substantiated in some Third World nations like the rapidly developing East Asia countries. These 'Little Tigers' have experienced rapid economic development surpassing even the growth rates of Japan. They are able to partially distribute the benefits of development to a wider section of the society. The example of Communist China has also proved damaging to dependency theory. Although China had previously sought to remain free of the world capitalist system, the country has experienced rapid growth after it came out of isolation and adopted a capitalist approach to development.

Similarly, diffusion theory can be criticized for overemphasizing the impact of the external factors such as imperialism, colonialism, and international organizations. This implies a downplaying of the importance of internal factors such as class conflicts, labour movements, and political structures. It also portrays the developing countries as helpless recipients of western ideas unable to devise their own social policy approaches. This has not been the case in all developing countries.

Explaining the Marginalization of Social Welfare

A distinction should be drawn between the development of social welfare on the one hand, and the marginalization of social welfare on the other. A good theory of social welfare development in the Third World needs to explain both phenomena. On this basis, it is clear that that the analyses afforded by the social conscience theory and the modernization theory are concerned primarily with the expansion of social welfare. They are thus weakly positioned to explain the underdevelopment of social welfare in developing countries. The starting point of their analyses is to ask questions relating to when social welfare will be

fully institutionalized. It is highly questionable whether modern social welfare institutions emerge as an integral part of the process of modernization in developing countries. Obviously, dependency theory and diffusion theory are better suited to explain the marginalization of social welfare because the starting point of their analyses is concerned with why social welfare institutions are poorly developed or inappropriate in developing countries. In this regard, diffusion theory fares better than the dependency theory since the latter predicts a state of complete impoverishment which does not accord with actual trends in many developing countries. Meanwhile, diffusion theory has formulated a number of policy recommendations to ameliorate social conditions. This suggests that diffusion theory has greater explanatory potential in the field of social policy development. Indeed, diffusion theory has far-reaching theoretical and policy implications. Owing to this breadth of analysis, it has several advantages over the other approaches.

First, it represents a broad-based approach to the study of social welfare provisions in developing countries, raising the important question of whether cultural diffusion is beneficial to developing countries. Dependency theory has rightly acknowledged the perils of western diffusion but its analysis has slighted the impact of cultural diffusion.

Second, diffusion theory is receptive to complementary hypotheses in its analysis, in particular those studies which focus on intra societal factors in the explanation of the dynamics of social welfare (Midgley, 1984a). Inevitably, its theoretical orientation is to heighten awareness of the importance of extra-societal factors in the interpretation of social welfare development. But the theory recognizes that the reality of social welfare development is so complex that it needs to incorporate other hypotheses to enrich its analysis.

Third, the theory offers a theoretical extension and powerful corrective to dependency theory by highlighting the role of diffusion and recommending appropriate policy options for addressing the problem. Among the many policy recommendations flowing from this approach, the indigenization of social work education and practice is just one example of corrective action which can be taken to foster appropriate forms of social intervention.

Fourth, diffusion theory has identified important agents (missionaries, charities, international organizations and laws) involved in the transmission of Western social policies. Most important, it has extended the concept of 'incremental social welfare' to the analysis of social welfare in developing countries (Midgley, 1981, 1984a,b, 1986; Hardiman & Midgley, 1989; Moser, 1989). This notion overcomes the limitation of many analyses of social policy in the developing world which merely rely on the duality of the institutional-residual welfare model.

Fifth, diffusion theory draws attention to the colonial origin of social welfare in the Third World. It has underscored the transmission of social policy from the metropolitan to the peripheral countries as another form of cultural domination. This idea is illustrated by Midgley's (1981) thesis of professional imperialism which criticizes the dominance of American and British social work theories and concepts in the evolution of social work in the Third World. Another example is the uncritical adoption of New Right arguments of government inefficiency in some developing countries when the debate on public and private provisions of welfare is far from settled in advanced capitalist countries.

Finally, diffusion theory has clearly described the process of the cultural transmission of inappropriate welfare institutions to developing nations. In the present world of incessant exchanges between different countries, the diffusion of ideas, technologies, and knowledge will have an impact on the forms social welfare institutions will take.

Conclusion

Major theories of social policy development are beset with problems when they are applied to explain events in the developing countries. These countries are so diverse and have such different historical, cultural and economic characteristics that no one theory can fully capture and explain the evolution of their social welfare systems or account for the marginalized position of social welfare in these nations. Nevertheless, this study contends that diffusion theory offers the best approach to studying the phenomenon of social welfare marginalization. Offering a broad framework for examining social policy, diffusion theory incorporates a number of significant intra-societal as well as exogenous

factors in the diffusion process. Obviously, both exogenous and indigenous factors must be weighed before any final conclusion on the marginalized position of social welfare in any one country is possible. Also, it is clear that much more work needs to be done if the theory is to comprehensively explain the marginalization of social welfare. One major area for further work involves the role of the state in social policy development. Although neglected by exponents of the theory, more attention needs to be placed on the role of the state in the process of diffusion and social policy development.

MacPherson (1982) has argued that the nation state is essentially a colonial artifact. Thus there is a centralization of power in the new ruling classes, undemocratic political structures, the dominance of an administrative class, and the powerful influence of the wealthy in political decision making. Post-colonial societies are marked by gross inequalities resulting from an inherited colonial system of economic stratification, established patterns of social segregation and elite privilege. Access to social welfare services are grossly distorted in favor of this elite. The governments of developing countries were careful not to jeopardize the interests of this class by taxing them too heavily. Thus the capacity for social welfare spending is limited and this, in turn has obvious implications for social welfare development.

On the other hand, some writers have shown that some developing countries, particularly in East Asia, have strong developmental states which guide and orchestrate rapid industrialization (Gold, 1986). These states formulate and implement national development strategies, plan for the effective deployment of labour and maintain low labour costs by effectively suppressing labour unrest (Deyo, 1987, 1989). In these countries, social policy is used effectively to manipulate and mobilize labor for development (Yeung, 1984; Chan, 1985; Park, 1990; Haggard, 1990; Tang, 1993). The state fosters social welfare development in a pro-active and deliberate way. However, cultural attitudes emanating from the legacy of Confucianism in these countries should also be considered since they affect the way the state operates and sanctions the expansion of programs that may be perceived to contradict cherished values of mutual support, filial piety, social harmony, and hard work. As Park (1990) notes, the state's adoption of these

values has contributed to the late enactment of social welfare legislation for the aged in Korea and other East Asian nations. Despite its value, therefore, diffusion theory needs to be augmented with a more extensive analysis of the role of the state in developing countries. It is only in this way, that its explanatory power can be fulfilled.

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