

**SOCIAL WORK, SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, AND
COMMUNITY WELFARE CENTERS IN
INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE¹**

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Abstract

Community welfare centers are among the most dynamic social institutions worldwide. Through their commitment to locality-based intervention, community centers keep people at the center of development. In doing so, they provide an institutional link between governments, people, and various coalitions of private stakeholders that make up the communities in which they are located. Community centers also engage in a broad range of social change activities, including advocacy with and on behalf of the community for reform of the underlying social, political, and economic conditions that undermine human dignity. Throughout the world, social workers serve as the primary professional leaders of a highly effective community centers movement.

¹ Reprinted from: *International Social Work* 40(1):43-55, 1997.

INTRODUCTION

The "community" and "community development" practice always have been at the conceptual center of social work practice in urban areas. The reasons for this are three-fold: 1) community work seeks to unite previously unorganized people into effective groups and coalitions that work together in pursuit of a shared social agenda (e.g., improved schools, safer neighborhoods, increased representation in political affairs, etc.); 2) community work seeks to strengthen traditional family, kinship, and neighborhood ties in the community and to develop new social arrangements that are essential to the effective functioning of communities; and 3) community-based social services are among the most effective and cost-efficient approaches for serving the poor (Butcher, 1994; Goodwin, 1989; Lee, 1988; Price, 1987; Twelvetrees, 1994; UN/ESCAP, 1992b). In addition to these functions, Spergel also suggests that community development is an essential ingredient in the success of democratic societies.

Community development emphasizes self-help and voluntary cooperation among members or residents of disadvantaged communities or sectors of society...Working on behalf of disadvantaged citizens, community development strives to the further the acquisition or redistribution of resources. It is also an educational process whose purpose is to increase social and political awareness of the causes of problems and to develop the capacity of community leaders to address those problems. Community development is important to the larger processes of social and economic change in a democratic society (Spergel, 1987:301).

The paper discusses the community welfare center movement from an international perspective. The paper will focus on: 1) the history of the community centers movement in Europe, North America, and elsewhere; 2) the roles and functions of the contemporary community centers "movement"; 3) community centers in the context of international social development; and, 4) the contribution of social work to community centers and, through community center work, to national and

international social development.

HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY WELFARE CENTER MOVEMENT

The community welfare center movement began in the early 20th century with the establishment of settlement houses and neighborhood centers in Europe and the United States. These movements shared a four-fold commitment to the geographic community as the base for decentralized service delivery. They also placed emphasis on the creation of partnerships between all segments of the community in responding to the needs of its less well off residents. Both movements also assigned priority to work with the poor and other groups of historically disadvantaged persons (but especially women, children, the elderly, disabled persons, oppressed workers, new immigrants, etc.). And, the settlement house and neighborhood center movements engaged in a broad range of advocacy efforts on behalf of the community for the achievement of more broadly-based social reform objectives at higher levels of political organization (Taylor & Roberts, 1985).

Toynbee Hall

The first settlement house was established in the slums of London in 1884. The first community-based center of its type, the leadership and staff of "Toynbee Hall" came primarily from members of the educated British upper classes who felt a deep compassion for the plight of the urbanized English poor. The staff lived in the settlement house along side the poor and, like others in the community, referred to themselves as "residents" (Loavenbruck & Keys, 1987).

Toynbee Hall was a service center, a research center, and a center of political action. Through its young and highly idealistic staff, Toynbee Hall provided extensive material assistance to the poor in their community. They also advocated with the poor for better wages and improved working conditions, and applied pressure on the local government for improvements in the physical infrastructure of the surrounding

community. The staff also conducted surveys of the needs that existed in the community surrounding Toynbee Hall and used the data to advocate for even broader social reforms.

The early successes of Toynbee Hall captured the imagination of action-oriented social workers everywhere. As a result, the Toynbee Hall model of community-based social intervention was quickly adapted for transfer to other parts of Europe and, in 1886, to North America.

The Settlement House "Movement" in the United States

In the United States the first "settlement house" was opened in New York City under the leadership of Stanton Coit, a former resident of Toynbee Hall. Other settlement houses soon followed in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Baltimore and in the country's other industrial cities. So rapid was the spread of the settlement house "movement" in the United States that, in 1911, the National Federation of Settlements (NFS) was formed. The goals of the Federation were three-fold: 1) to support the organizational efforts of local centers; 2) to provide a forum for local centers to share their experiences; and 3) to advocate for social reform at the national level (Loavenbruck & Keys, 1987).

The Federation provided an extraordinary level of material assistance to America's poor, the majority of whom were new immigrants to the United States who were living under conditions of squalor in the country's over-industrialized cities. But the Federation's activities did not stop with the provision of concrete services. Through advocacy efforts directed at all levels of political organization, the Federation and its members had a profound impact on American social policy and, in turn, on community-based social work practice. Their efforts, for example, resulted in the development of:

child labor laws, public health laws, kindergarten and day care programs, Visiting Nurse services, public housing, music schools and art programs for the poor, community-

based adult education services, courses on naturalization (for new immigrants), and parks and playgrounds, among many other accomplishments (Loavenbruck & Keys, 1987:557).

By the 1950s the NFS had a membership of more than 300 settlement houses and neighborhood centers. In 1979 the Federation reorganized itself as "United Neighborhood Centers of America" (UNCA), a title that better reflected the diverse community organizations that formed its membership (Loavenbruck & Keys, 1987).

Though less active today in the United States than in years past, the UNCA today continues to be an organization of community-based centers that work with and on behalf of the poor (Kelly, 1986; Lee, 1988; Lewis, 1983; Price, 1987; Taylor & Roberts, 1985; Twelvetrees, 1994).

COMMUNITY CENTERS TODAY: CONTINUITY IN MISSION

The contemporary community centers movement is an active and viable force for advancing the social well-being of the world's poor and historically disadvantaged people. Today, the community centers movement exists in virtually every country and region of the world; as in the past, centers retain their dual commitment to social reform and the provision of locally available services to people in their own communities. Thus, throughout the world, community centers:

1. emphasize the geographic community as the most effective locus for decentralized services (Butcher, 1994; Cnaan, 1991; McKnight, 1987; Rubin, 1986; Twelvetrees, 1994);
2. place people at the center of development (Chi, 1985; Pernell, 1986; Rahman, 1993; UN/ESCAP, 1992b; UNDP, 1993);
3. provide an institutional link between governments and people (UN/ESCAP, 1992b; Vasoo, 1990);
4. promote the establishment of community partnerships in responding to the needs of

- less fortunate residents (Estes, 1993a; Regab, 1981; Twelvetrees, 1994);
5. provide a broad spectrum of material assistance to the poor (Butcher, 1994; Chi, 1985; Rahman, 1993);
 6. seek to advance the social, political, and economic rights of historically disadvantaged population groups (Campfens, 1990; Goodwin, 1989; Renshaw, 1988);
 7. advocate for more fundamental social reforms with and on behalf of the people who live in their communities (Cnaan, 1991; Price, 1987).

The activities of contemporary community centers are far reaching; they actively seek to engage people, institutions, and other social collectivities in complex processes that seek to improve the well-being of people at all levels of social organization. In many countries, community centers function as the major vehicle through which the social transformation of entire societies is attempted.

SOCIAL WORK, SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, AND COMMUNITY CENTERS

The contemporary community centers movement is part of the larger international social development movement, i.e., a complex field that includes practice across all geo-political borders and at all levels of social, political, and economic organization. The ultimate goal of the social development movement, like that of the social work profession, is to secure for people everywhere the satisfaction of at least their basic social and material needs (Estes, 1992 and 1993b).

Social development practice in social work (i.e., "developmental social work") and, in turn, in the community centers movement is quite diverse. First, developmental social work practice includes the provision of personal social services to people in distress, but especially to victims of war, refugees, orphaned children. Second, developmental social workers engage in organiza-

tional efforts directed at helping poor and other powerless people remove the sources of their oppression (e.g., corrupt landlords, unjust employers, colonial administrators, racism, etc). Third, developmental social workers seek both to establish new social institutions (e.g., for credit unions, mutual aid societies, community welfare centers, seed banks, social security schemes, etc.) and to reform of existing institutions so as to make them more accessible and responsible to the needs of those for whom the institutions were designed. And developmental social workers also seek to accelerate the pace of social development in local communities, states and provinces, nations, regions and, ultimately, the world itself (Estes, 1993b, 1994).

Social development practice also includes efforts to promote adherence to internationally guaranteed human rights, promote peace and conflict resolution, and protect the planet's fragile eco-systems (Estes, 1993b). Social workers throughout the world strongly identify with and continue to work toward a fuller realization of the profession's historic commitment to the promotion of human rights (Van Soest, 1992).

The Values of Social Development Practice

Like those of the community centers movement, the values of the worldwide social development movement emphasize respect for the unity of life on earth, the minimization of violence, the satisfaction of basic human needs, the primacy of human dignity, the retention of diversity and pluralism and, the need for universal participation in the process of attaining worldwide social transformation (Estes, 1993b). These values, of course, are also central to social work practice and provide critical direction to the profession's activities in social development (Bargal, 1981; Bolan, 1987).

The Social Development Knowledge Base

Social development practitioners draw substantially for their knowledge from sociology (esp. stratification theory, the sociology of mass movements, processes of regional development),

Chart 1.
LEVELS & DEFINITIONS OF SED PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK

Levels of SED Practice	Major Purposes, Outcomes, or Processes Associated With Levels of International Social Work Practice
Individual and Group Empowerment	Through "self help," "mutual aid," and "conscientization" strategies individuals and groups learn how to perceive and <u>act upon</u> the contradictions that exist in the social, political, and economic structures intrinsic to all societies.
Conflict Resolution	Efforts directed at reducing: (1) grievances between persons or groups; or, (2) asymmetric power relationships between members of more powerful and less powerful groups.
Institution-Building	Refers both to the process of "humanizing" existing social institutions and that of establishing new institutions that respond more effectively to new or emerging social needs.
Community-Building	Through increased participation and "social animation" of the populace, the process through which community's realize the fullness of their social, political, and economic potential; the process through which communities respond more equitably to the social and material needs of their populations.
Nation-Building	The process of working toward the integration of a nation's social, political, economic, and cultural institutions at all levels of political organization.
Region-Building	The process of working toward the integration of a geo-political region's social, political, economic, and cultural institutions at all levels of social organization.
World-Building	The process of working toward the establishment of a new system of international relationships guided by the quest for world peace, increased social justice, the universal satisfaction of basic human needs, and for the protection of the planet's fragile eco-system.

Source: Estes, 1994

political science (esp. power domains, political influence, and structures of political parties), economics (esp. theories of economic production, distribution, and consumption), education (esp. theories of adult learning), philosophy (esp. theories of justice and social ethics) and, in some cases, from religion (e.g., the "liberation theology" of Gustavo Guterrez, *et al.*).

Developmental social workers also draw heavily from group work, and community

organization practice for their skill base.

Practitioners in the community centers movement also draw substantially from social administration, social planning, and fund raising for their skills.

Levels of Social Development Practice

Development-focused community center practice engages people and institutions at seven levels of practice (Chart 1): *individual and group empowerment; conflict resolution; institution-building; community-building;*

nation-building; region-building; and world-building.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT-ORIENTED COMMUNITY CENTER PRACTICE

Community centers are found everywhere in the world, albeit their functions and the types of service they provide differ with respect to auspices, local needs, available resources, and the training of center personnel. Wherever they are located, however, community centers share with social work, and with the social development movement more broadly, the same fundamental commitments to assisting people who are poor and disempowered overcome the sources of their privation.

Africa and Latin America

In Africa and Latin America community centers are the primary institutions through which impoverished people receive services. Centers operate well-baby clinics, immunization campaigns, non-formal adult education classes, and also offer family planning, nutritional, counseling, conflict resolution, and other types of services.

Community centers also provide a structure for organizing people for building and other projects that are needed by the community, e.g., local school houses, health clinics, water and irrigation systems, solid waste disposal, seed banks, and so on. In some cases, centers also assist community residents in organizing for social reform campaigns at the local or higher political levels.

In the main, community centers in Africa and Latin America are operated by personnel with a wide range of educational and professional backgrounds, including no formal education at all. Comparatively few workers in the field have received professional training in the human services and fewer still appreciate the expansive nature of the worldwide community centers movement in the context of worldwide social development efforts. Most centers simply provide a range of critically needed material assistance to people residing in the local community.

Funding in support community center activities in Africa and Latin America tend to come primarily from private and non-governmental sources, albeit governments are increasingly financ-

ing the delivery of basic health and education services in both rural and urban areas. Governments also have assumed major responsibility for infrastructure development both within communities and in the areas that surround them, e.g., for roads, communications systems, transportation, etc. In urban areas, however, urban centers tend to be better financed with the bulk of their funding coming from specialized government agencies.

The Pacific

People-centered development throughout the Pacific occurs at the community level. As a result, virtually all human services available in the Pacific region are delivered through community welfare centers (UNDP, 1993). The majority of these centers are sponsored by non-governmental organizations, albeit their funding comes jointly from public and private sources.

Most centers are organized to provide concrete services to local people. Some assist with the construction of local public health clinics and schools while others offer job training courses to unskilled workers. Centers frequently serve as community meeting sites, polling places and, in some places, as centers of adult education. Well-baby clinics, family planning services, and meal services are also generally available at community centers.

Community centers in the Pacific rarely organize people for political action or social reform. Most Pacific societies are organized along village and tribal lines and, hence, issues of governance and policy making are handled through traditional institutions. Nonetheless, community centers often serve as important links between people and governments at higher levels of political organization.

Asia

The community center movement in Asia must be understood in the context of the high levels of absolute poverty and relative powerlessness that has characterized the region for much of the 20th

century. The region's recurrent wars, political divisions, ethnic conflicts, and other problems have also shaped Asia's community center movements.

Community centers in Asia receive most their funding through public sources, albeit the private sector is beginning to play an increasingly more important role. Similarly, the staff of Asian community centers tend to be better educated than elsewhere and, often, the centers are organized into regional and national coalitions of centers. Comparatively few Asian community centers, however, engage in overtly political advocacy efforts with the exception of seeking to promote the establishment of new programs or services (Leung, 1990; Stone, 1989; Turner, 1993; Vasoo, 1990).

Community Centers and the Manila Declaration

The most comprehensive summary of the Asian region's recent social history and its contemporary social problems is to be found in the background documents there were prepared as part of the recently adopted "Manila Declaration on Social Development for the Asia and Pacific Region Toward the Year 2000 and Beyond" (UN/ESCAP, 1992b). In brief, the Manila Declaration commits all 54 of the region's governments to achieving the following goals by the year 2000, or as soon thereafter as possible: 1) the elimination of absolute poverty; 2) the enhancement of popular participation; and 3) the promotion of distributive justice.

In response to the Manila Declaration, community centers throughout Asia are expected to play a major role in helping the region's governments achieve their social development goals. Indeed, given their proximity to and special knowledge of people at the local level, community centers are expected to serve as leading actors in advancing the Declaration's far-reaching objectives. Working even more closely with governments and other non-governmental organizations than has been the case in the past, therefore, community centers are expected to:

1. promote fuller integration of social and economic development across all sector and at all level of political organization;
2. promote partnerships between governments, business leaders, religious

- organizations, people themselves, and others at all levels of social organization;
3. enhance the participation of people to the fullest extent possible in determining both the goals and means of development;
4. work toward the elimination of absolute poverty and its causes;
5. seek to the remove barriers to development that, in every community, are used to oppress historically disadvantaged population groups; and,
6. promote the transformation of communities and whole societies toward more humanistic values based on social justice, the promotion of peace, and the attainment of the fullest possible levels of human development.

Hence, the Manila Declaration on Social Development calls on social workers and social welfare leaders throughout the region to adopt a more developmental approach to the provision of human services.² Along with other development-oriented disciplines, social welfare leaders are challenged to redirect their energies toward humanizing existing social institutions and building new ones. The Declaration also encourages social workers to be more active in the international human rights, peace promotion, and environmental protection movements--all areas that are considered essential to region's prospects for further development.

² As described by United Nations (1988), "Developmental social welfare focuses on the maximization of human potential and on fostering self-reliance and participation in decision-making, and stresses the organization of family-oriented, community-based and integrated services. Social welfare programmes assist individuals and groups at various stages and in different circumstances of life to develop their capacities and to become or remain productive members of society, in addition to supporting those in need of care, protection and financial help" (Para 47).

CONCLUSIONS

Locality-based community centers continue to serve as one of the most effective institutional resources for promoting broad-based social, political, and economic development. Community centers have been shown to be particularly effective in reaching the poor and other historically disadvantaged population groups including women and children, the aged, chronically ill persons, and those without permanent homes. Community centers also are recognized to be highly effective organizations for assisting groups of disenfranchised persons to engage in collective action directed at eliminating the sources of their deprivation. Indeed, recent declarations and resolutions by the United Nations and other international development assistance organizations emphasize the contribution of community centers in reducing poverty, promoting popular participation, and in advancing fuller social justice. Community centers also are highly efficient organizations for delivering critically needed services to population groups that are underserved by traditional agencies and organizations. These centers have been especially effective in providing comprehensive health, education, and other human services to groups of widely scattered persons and to those living in urban slums and other impoverished areas. Most centers combine service with some measure of professional education and research and, thereby, contribute to the preparation of the next generation of service providers for careers in serving people in their locales.

The contribution of the social work profession to the community centers movement has been a long and mutually beneficial one. Indeed, community centers offer a "natural environment" for social work practice; in their very essence they integrate the "social" with the "personal" in social work practice. Community center work has helped to keep the profession faithful to its social reform mission, and close to the least well off in every society. Community center work also provides developmental social workers with important links to their colleagues working in other countries and regions of the world.

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