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Ralph Dolgoff

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## What does social welfare produce?

● **Ralph Dolgoff**

### The contextual challenge

Global issues which concern many nations and the broad spectrum of society have arisen which hold special importance for social welfare. The world has entered an age of intense international economic competition related to issues of motivation, economic growth, employment, productivity, financial stability, budget deficits, taxation and ideologies deemed to be supportive of successful economic competition.

One aspect of these issues is increased unemployment rates in western Europe where not one net new job was created from 1973 to 1994 (Thurow, 1996: 1–2). Rolling recessions have affected the United States, western Europe and Japan. Unemployment rates in some industrialized nations reached the highest levels experienced since the Second World War. The prospect of chronic joblessness led to examining assumptions about salaries, social welfare benefits and tax policies. One result of this examination is that an apparent agreement has arisen that the high cost of occupational and social benefits is an important reason why some economies are unable to create a sufficient number of jobs.

A backlash occurred against social welfare provision in widely separated places, including western Europe, Canada, New Zealand, central and eastern Europe, and in the United States (Esping-Andersen, 1996). In a number of South American and Caribbean nations social security pensions have been devalued and health services have deteriorated. Chile moved to privatize the social welfare system (Inter-American Development Bank, 1991). In the United States there has been a return to traditional anti-

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**Ralph Dolgoff** is at the University of Maryland, Baltimore, 525 W. Redwood Street, Baltimore, MD 21201, USA. [email: [rdolgoff@ssw.umaryland.edu](mailto:rdolgoff@ssw.umaryland.edu)]

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federalism, a focus on individual and family responsibility as strategies for social welfare which do not cost tax dollars, and these along with voluntary efforts have once again become ascendant values. Many citizens and legislators turn away from governmental action and social welfare programs on the basis of political ideology rather than evidence. In their view, governmental action and social welfare programs are incompetent, untrustworthy, cost-inefficient, undermine self-reliance by encouraging dependence, are tilted against freedom and autonomy, and subvert economic productivity. Additional factors support a re-evaluation of welfare financing, including ageing populations, technological innovations and widespread aversion to taxes. These combined factors led to shrinking social welfare programs that are in retreat in many places.

Despite ignored danger signals in the mid-1970s (Wilensky, 1975; Zald, 1977: 11–24), the reality of the international marketplace can now be seen: capital mobility, free trade and intense competition for budget dollars. The demand for accountability will be here for a long time, requiring additional tools for welfare advocacy.

Various groups have used the situation to begin ‘rolling back’ welfare programs; but the act of ‘rolling back’ which appears to be incremental, can become ‘doing away with’. The Speaker of the United States House of Representatives suggested that more orphanages might help slow the disintegration of America’s social order (Maraniss and Weisskopf, 1996: 10) and was perceived as wanting Medicare to ‘wither on the vine’ (p. 143). Major congressional figures argued that people are not entitled to anything but opportunity.

But rolling back is not the end of the new-old philosophy. Olasky in the highly influential *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (1995) in a return to social Darwinism indicts all governmental social welfare. According to him, the war on poverty was a disaster; an emphasis on entitlements displaced a focus on need; and the United States should return social services to compassionate private and religious institutions.

Such criticisms of social welfare have not come only from the right. As early as 1972, considering the question whether ‘paternalist welfare enfeebles the virtuous and valued properties of initiative, independence, and, if you will, self-help’, T.H. Marshall concluded that the question ‘is a difficult one to answer honestly . . . and there are ways in which over-paternalism in welfare can do social harm’ (Marshall, 1972).

Calls for cost-containment and efficiency have an effect on social welfare programs at every level and undoubtedly will continue to affect social welfare's future. How much and what types of social welfare are needed at what cost by a society? What part does social welfare play in the attainment of national goals? The question is being asked: what does social welfare produce for our societies? Social welfare is now judged from the perspective of an imposed capitalist value model.

There has been a re-elevation of 19th-century rugged individualism above almost all else. Dependency of any kind is an unfit human state; dependency upon the public is even worse. Social welfare programs are claimed to produce many of the ills of society – economic, social, moral, and cultural – and are viewed by many as negative and as economic, social and moral burdens.

### **Positive views of social welfare functions**

What responses have been provided to these criticisms? The rationales in favor of social welfare are almost invariably offered in terms of humanitarianism and social justice. Arguments such as the following are presented.

1. Market failures should be remedied and everyone should be brought to a social minimum.
2. Social welfare should protect the interests of those who are not in a position to protect themselves. It is the moral duty of the strong to protect the weak.
3. Social welfare's function is to limit the domain of inequality. Greater equality is necessary, therefore resources should be redistributed and the society should aim at social equality, an end in itself.
4. Social solidarity and a sense of community are good things (Furniss and Tilton, 1977; Goodin, 1988: 5; Tobin, 1970).

Bell gives a typical social justice justification for social welfare in suggesting that 'social welfare must be judged against standards of equity and social justice and by its success in translating humanitarian values into living realities' (Bell, 1983: 2). Many advocates suggest social welfare has a moral basis and social justice requires social welfare (Beverly and McSweeney, 1987: 1–14; Reid and Popple, 1992: 1–6).

In today's world, redistribution, compensation, equality, social solidarity and social justice are weak straws by which to defend

social welfare. The social justice argument is rejected by many who believe social justice is better served through the marketplace. There are those who believe that the market 'calls forth, propagates, and relies upon the best and most generous of human qualities' (Gilder, 1981).

Two strategies are needed to counter this perspective. First, social justice – at this time – casts no votes and hires few lobbyists. Budgetary decisions are political decisions and so the defense of social welfare continues to require educational efforts and political organization. Second, even raw political power must usually be clothed in rationality. Aside from the social justice arguments, what arguments can be made which – in this particular age and context – support appropriate uses of social welfare?

Atherton (1990: 41–5) offered a pragmatic defense strategy of the welfare state by suggesting that proponents of the welfare state demonstrate that the welfare state is compatible with and even enhances conservative values such as individual liberty and free markets. Atherton's major strategy is to support genuine equality of opportunity, the conservative claim of a level playing field. But what arguments other than fairness and social justice can be used to make the playing field more level? In the following section, other and necessary strategies are presented for maintaining social welfare and, perhaps, in some circumstances, moving further toward the level playing field for all.

### **An alternative perspective and strategy**

In an effort to identify arguments stronger than social justice, five benefits of social welfare are proposed which should provide more acceptable rationales and shift perspectives. Mishra (1984: 131) expressed this point of view:

Social welfare has been looked at from the standpoint of consumption and distribution. The connection with production has been scarcely explored. The result is a failure to grasp the problems specific to a capitalist market economy – profitability, accumulation, investment, international competitiveness and the like ...

So it is from the production side that we want to proceed. The benefits of social welfare introduced below, although overlapping, suggest what the elements are of the production side. However, a review of social work and social welfare literature found sparse research supportive of these benefits. From this perspective, education, health care, employment and training, and public assistance

initiatives have received more attention and acknowledgement of their societal contributions (Schorr, 1989; Oliner, 1994; Psacharopoulos, 1995).

Ways to justify social welfare need to be identified that are consistent with the international market economy and the rigors it applies to societies. The identification of these benefits is not an argument against fairness or social justice, but suggests that the humanitarian arguments need to be supplemented.

## Five benefits

### 1. *Human capital*

The quality of a society's population is a scarce resource with economic value as an investment, as consumers and as taxpayers. There are estimates that investments in people account for approximately one-fifth of the annual increase in productivity achieved over the last three decades. Economic studies have demonstrated the high returns from public investments in human capital, including education and job training, as pro-growth policies and ingredients in breaking the cycle of poverty (*Economic Report of the President* (1996: 31). From a human capital and cost-benefit perspective, the poverty of low-income families leads to expensive losses for society. Low-income children are at a higher risk for: low birthweight, abuse or neglect, physical, mental and learning disabilities, and school days missed because of acute and chronic health conditions. Several years ago there were estimates that each year a child lives in poverty costs the economy \$2466–12,105. In 1992, for the 14.6 million poor children, the estimates for reduced worker output, as measured by lower lifetime earnings in 1992 dollars, ranged from \$36 billion to \$177 billion. The social and economic costs of childhood poverty are substantial for the poor and for the entire society (Sherman, 1994: 41–6), thus, 'inequality wastes human capital' (Furniss and Tilton, 1977: 31).

In the United States, each time there is a mass military mobilization, a high percentage of potential recruits are rejected. During the 1960s, it was estimated that one-third of all young men reaching age 18 were found unqualified for induction into the armed forces. A majority of those disqualified appeared to be victims of inadequate education and insufficient health services. Failure to prevent or minimize these types of problems had a costly impact not only in a time of crisis but for years following (Schorr, 1989: 9–10, 126).

## 2. *Social benefits*

As early as 1976, Brenner identified the impact of the stress and strain of recessions and their important health and other consequences: more fatal heart attacks and strokes, more homicides, more suicides, increased occurrences of cirrhosis of the liver, mental illness, arrests and imprisonments. In addition, there is loss of income and accelerated business failures, all of which can produce family stress, job anxiety and altered behavior (Brenner, 1976; Merva and Fowles, 1992).

Studies have shown that those who are laid off when plants close become vulnerable to health and psychological difficulties, as well as family tensions and conflict. Beyond the loss of income, benefits are lost that sustained good nutrition and health care, and there are social losses such as meaningful work, self-esteem, social ties and an expected routine of getting up and going to work (Perrucci et al., 1988).

Numerous studies have found that large percentages of child-abusing fathers and stepfathers were unemployed during the year and/or at the time they were abusers. Reports show that both the number and severity of child abuse cases increase during recessions, with the greatest number of abuse problems found in counties with the highest unemployment rates. Family service agencies found that family violence increased during a recession, and case studies document an upsurge in the use of child welfare services following the closing of industrial plants. Recessions are stressful for those who lose their jobs as well as for those maintaining continued employment (Jones, 1990: 579–88).

A survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found infant mortality rates were 60 percent higher for women living below the poverty line than for those above it. Researchers found the children of low-income women between four weeks old and their first birthdays twice as likely to die during that period (*New York Times*, 1995: A32).

## 3. *Societal morale and cohesion*

There are two ways in which social welfare provision is supportive of societal morale and cohesion and has the benefit of reducing the costs of potential or current conflict. These unifying themes serve the self-interest of individual citizens as well as that of the nation as a whole. Beginning with the Revolutionary War, veterans and their families have been recipients of favorable treatment. In fact, Civil War pensions for disabled soldiers and the widows and dependents

of deceased soldiers became the largest single item of federal expenditure, except for debt service, in every year from 1885 to 1897, and reached 41.5 percent in 1893 (Skocpol, 1992: 128–9).

In Germany, the end of the Franco-Prussian War led to Bismarck's experiments with workmen's compensation, sickness insurance and old-age insurance: the beginning of the welfare state (Moynihan, 1996: 82). In fact, Bismarck's creation of national social insurances was specifically tied to purchasing social peace needed during a period of industrialization (Halborn, 1969: 292; Snyder, 1958: 245).

Similarly in Great Britain, a connection has been established between war, morale, social cohesion and social welfare. During both world wars, social welfare provision was enhanced and/or announcements were made about the programs to be implemented following the wars, including comprehensive health services, youth services, educational opportunity for all, regardless of family income, and social security (Marshall, 1967: 75–89; Titmuss, 1969).

Ways have been identified recently by which societal cohesion has been found to support economic productivity and incomes and affect the degree of violence in neighborhoods. Putnam et al. (1993) found in Italy that trust, societal norms and social networks improve the efficiency of society by facilitating co-ordinated actions. Furthermore, economic productivity and income were found to be highly correlated with the social integration of motivated and participating citizens. Social solidarity was identified as a key element in economic development.

Furthermore, in one of the largest studies of crime and delinquency (334 Chicago neighborhoods), lower rates of violence were found in urban neighborhoods with a strong sense of community and common values. Collective efficacy (defined as social cohesion among neighbors combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good) was found to be the strongest predictor of the violent crime rate and was linked to reduced violence (Sampson et al., 1997).

#### *4. Economic benefits*

Several theories have been introduced to explain the interrelationship of social welfare and the economy. One set is exemplified by those who suggest that welfare spending helps maintain the economic and social equilibrium in industrial societies. Marxists argue that social welfare helps to maintain the power of capital and



reduce social protest. A third school asserts social welfare is the result of political efforts by the working classes to improve their quality of life through protection and supports. Still another group explains social welfare as an outcome of interest-group politics; democratic political institutions combined with demographic and economic changes in social structure explain social welfare spending. A final group suggests the nature of nation-states encourages social welfare expenditures because of factors such as centralization and a corporatist organization of the state, the strength of administrative bureaucracies, the structure of state taxation and the electoral cycle itself (Pampel and Williamson, 1989: 23–4).

The redistributive effects of social welfare programs have not injured the very wealthy; their accumulations continue at an astounding rate. The social security tax is regressive, but payments are tilted toward lowest earners whose earnings are replaced at a higher proportion than middle and upper income persons. So, there are redistributive effects but these effects eventuate in personal and family expenditures, establishing social welfare as an economic stabilizer.

Another economic feature of social welfare is illustrated by the rise in unemployment compensation payments when growing numbers of employees are laid off. The spending of this group serves as a counter-cyclical force in the economy. When the economy enters a business-cycle recession, money is paid out and spent for personal or family expenses, thus increasing the demand side of the economy which leads to higher output and employment. When the economy is booming, tax collections can help to counter accelerating inflation. These tax or expenditure increases can modify the fluctuations of the business cycle. The expenditures also have a multiplier effect, that is, the recipients of payments engage in spending of their own. New employment and incomes are created and – in turn – create further demand for goods and services.

In addition to consumer spending and taxation effects, social welfare is notable as a third sector of the economy. In the United States in 1992, private (non-governmental) social welfare spending, including health care, totalled \$825 billion (13.7 percent of Gross Domestic Product). Furthermore, in 1994 there were 1.85 million tax-exempt voluntary and philanthropic organizations devoted to social welfare. These data reflect an industry that is a major force in the economy.

The economic costs of social problems can also be offset by appropriate social welfare expenditures. Untreated substance

abusers cost many millions of dollars in costs attributable to crime, the criminal justice system, increased medical care and lost productivity. According to one study, substance abuse cost New York City \$20 billion in 1994; one in five tax dollars is spent coping with the effects of smoking, drinking and drug use (Wren, 1996: B4). The annual cost of teen-age pregnancy in the US in 1996 was estimated at \$7 billion (Passell, 1996: D2).

Studies of crime have found similar results. The most comprehensive study of the price of violence estimated that crime costs the US \$450 billion per year. Included in the costs were the cost of child abuse and domestic violence, mental health care, along with rape, murder, and robbery, as well as a reduced quality of life. Another study found that preventing a 'high risk' young person in a poor neighborhood from a troubled family from turning into a juvenile delinquent and adult criminal would save the US between \$1.5 and \$2 million (Butterfield, 1996: A8).

Important groundwork has been undertaken by Midgley (1995, 1996a, 1996b) and Sherraden (1985, 1991) whose contributions have focused on the ways in which social welfare can contribute effectively to economic development through social investment. Midgley advocates the developmental approach as an alternative to both residual and institutional welfare models because social welfare needs to be linked and to contribute positively to economic development. By assisting in the mobilization of human capital, increasing opportunities for productive employment and self-employment among low-income and special-needs groups, investment in education, childhood nutrition, health care and skills training, social development can generate returns on investment and contribute to economic growth.

Sherraden (1991) argues for investment which increases present and future productivity through asset development among low-income groups. Incentives and resources should be provided that encourage savings and asset development among the poor so that they can accumulate the social investments needed to meet their needs and those of their children. Instead of an emphasis on subsistence income and consumption by poor persons, the focus should be on savings, investment and accumulation, in order to help them become stakeholders in society. When persons hold assets and have a stake in the system, they overcome their poverty economically, socially and psychologically.

### 5. *Civility and aesthetics*

In the United States, mental hospitals and prisons were historically built in rural locations to serve several purposes. Construction of buildings and other infrastructures brought jobs to where they were scarce. There was an additional motivation. Prisoners and the mentally ill were out of sight.

Even today many people prefer not to be disturbed by the sight of homeless people or to be accosted by them. It is uncomfortable and difficult to live in a society where so many children are poor, unhealthy and poorly educated. Most people prefer to live in a society in which one is not confronted daily by unsightly and disturbing images. A civil society does not allow homelessness and hunger. Although one cannot assign a dollar value to a society which reflects fairness, civility and shared values, nevertheless, there are societal benefits even if difficult to measure.

### **A new perspective and implications**

In this paper, five benefits of social welfare congruent with the current context for human services have been suggested: human capital, social benefits, societal morale and cohesion, economic benefits, civility and aesthetics. The purpose of defining benefits has been to propose social welfare's contributions to society and to suggest more contextually congruent ways to empower social welfare during this era. Social welfare advocates need to shift from countervailing arguments against the market to seek greater proof of the productive benefits of social welfare within market economies.

In the United States there are strong governmental forces (including the Government Performance and Results Act [1993] and the Service Efforts and Accomplishments initiative of the Accounting Standards Board) exerted on programs to include measurable outcome-related goals and objectives (Kautz et al., 1997).

### **Conclusions and implications**

For those concerned with social welfare, there are several issues.

1. The necessity to recognize the reality of the context.
2. Examination of criticisms so that where they are accurate corrective action can be taken.

3. The need to gather empirical evidence that social welfare programs are efficient, effective and produce benefits for society.
4. Re-consideration of traditional policy and practice perspectives which have focused on residual and institutional perspectives; policies and programs consistent with the broader and changed foci as suggested in this paper and by Midgley and Sherraden should be explored and tested. To do so will require a paradigm shift in assumptions and theories.
5. The use of productivity as a strategic tool to be joined with education and political organizing.

Questions need to be asked and answers found about which interventions are more cost-effective. For example, what are the economic and other benefits of the services provided by mental health centers, by family service agencies and by other social welfare organizations?

These issues call for swimming upstream against the tide and require recasting perspectives, including arguing not just from morality but also from pragmatic successes. To the extent social welfare can document positive benefits in terms appreciated by policy influentials, the greater the potential for its protection. Examples of the types of studies needed include the evaluation of the cost-effectiveness of employee assistance programs (Decker et al., 1986: 391–3), the nutritional, health and economic benefits of the special supplemental food program for women, infants and children (Schorr, 1989; US Department of Agriculture, 1990), the costs and benefits of diverting children from crime (Rand Research Briefs, 1996) and a study that found that states' expenditures per head for public welfare are inversely related to their suicide rates (Zimmerman, 1995: 425–34).

The choice is not either social justice or empirically driven pragmatism but both, with a greater emphasis on evidence on the benefits of social welfare. Both societal and individual self-interest, as well as social justice, require social welfare.

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