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# SOCIAL WORK'S CHALLENGE IN THE YEARS AHEAD IN POLICY FORMULATION AND CHANGE

Daniel S. Sanders\*

## *Social Work and the Arena of Policy Process*

THE twentieth century is uniquely the era of "pervasive and persistent social change." The social work profession, which in a strict sense came into being in this century, faces the challenge of being increasingly responsive to the changes and the new needs that arise in society. What should be the profession's response? Specifically, how should the social work profession respond to the challenge of being involved in policy formulation and change? What are the issues that have to be dealt with in this task?

It is perhaps unrealistic to think that social workers by themselves could exercise a dominant change role, given the complexity of the policy process. However, social workers in collaboration with other strategic forces assuredly can play a more effective role.

There is undoubtedly a growing awareness of the need to enter the policy-making arena, to influence policy changes.<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, individual social workers are engaged in this task of policy formulation at different levels, often in collaboration with persons from other disciplines. This is evident at the state and national level, where social workers have, to some extent, in recent years begun to work close to the policy arena, as policy analysts, consultants, legislative aides and planners,

collaborating with members of allied disciplines. Individual social workers, have also, as citizens, actively participated in citizen groups working toward specific policy changes. But what is the trend in the profession as a whole? While there is a great deal of interest and willingness to explore this often conflicting and confused area of policy formulation and change, certain barriers seem to stand in the way.

Among the factors that impede involvement in the political process and policy decisions are the view that "politics is dirty," the predominant emphasis in the profession on "micro rather than macro changes"; the situation where the profession is often confused with the agency, and the "binding effects" of often being locked into the "social welfare bureaucracy."<sup>2</sup>

The extent to which social workers will be involved in the policy arena is also tied up with the outcome of the ongoing debate concerning how far the social work profession should focus on the developmental function in addition to remedial, preventive and supportive functions. The developmental function will necessitate close attention to goals and direction of social policy; development of resources, the basis for allocation of social and economic resources and their impact on people; and a more integrated

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approach in the development of social and economic policies. The international conference of ministers responsible for social welfare, held under the auspices of the United Nations in 1968, for example, highlighted the urgent need for social workers to participate in and contribute to the development of policy, and to consider the role of social welfare in the context of national development.<sup>3</sup>

It could be held that the political process is the major instrument for introducing social reform and significant social policy changes, noting at the same time that not all social policy is legislated, and that a fair amount of social policy related to "persons in need" is not to be found in statutes.<sup>4</sup> The Social Security programme in the U.S., introduced by the Act of 1935, and the progressive changes that followed are unique examples of the success of deliberately planned efforts to introduce major social policy changes through the legislative process. Major policy decisions regarding social welfare programmes will probably continue to be made through the political process, and in some instances as a by-product of legislation designed for other purposes. In this context, the degree of commitment by the social work profession to enter this arena of policy process, and to consider relevant functions here as intimately related to social work practice, seems crucial.

Needless to say, the decision to enter the arena of policy process does not imply abandoning the traditional tasks and concerns of the profession. Rather it should be seen as helping to strengthen these very tasks, in the effort to influence policies that determine the basis and the framework within which these tasks are performed, and new ones undertaken as necessary. It is a challenge to respond equally to the "priestly" and the "prophetic" aspects of the profession,

to service as well as reform and policy changes.<sup>5</sup>

Some social workers have said that when the social worker attempts to influence policy formulation or change at levels beyond the client, the family, and persons who have a direct interest of responsibility for the client's well-being, the situation becomes too complex and efforts seem futile. In this context it has been stated that "to characterize as a responsibility of professional social work" the effecting of social policy changes at levels involving the lives of large masses of people is to minimize the "myriad forces, persons, values and aspirations" that operate in the policy-making process.<sup>6</sup> It is said that, as the scope of policy and the range of persons and institutions that it influences become more "inclusive," it becomes "unwieldy" for the social worker, as well as others who are more directly involved in the policy process. However, the complex and conflicting nature of the policy process, and the fact that social workers as an "interest group" will be one of several other interest groups, are insufficient arguments for abdicating responsibility in the policy-making arena. It is perhaps unrealistic for social workers to think that they could by themselves influence social policy. The other extreme, however, is to shy away from this important area of responsibility, stating that the process is too confused, that efforts amount to nothing very significant, that it is not even possible to know who makes social policy.<sup>7</sup> Indeed this very situation challenges the social work profession to respond with greater resourcefulness, special skills, research on policy process as to significant points at which strategic intervention is effective; flexibility in working with other groups; and the capacity to present the values and policy stands of social workers and related interests, in competition with others.

Peter Rossi maintains that social workers should increasingly in the future move closer to the public sector of community life and work closely with the politician. He speaks of the need for "Harry Hopkinses all over the country." "Social workers," he points out, "need the politician and he needs them." The entry of social workers into the public sector of community life in this way would lead ultimately to entry into similar capacities on state and national levels. In urging social workers to move closer to the politician, he suggests especially collaboration with politicians in the Democratic party, "whose commitment to the ideology of social welfare," he says, has "to be reinforced and given content."<sup>8</sup> While the identification of a professional group with one party may pose difficulties, the possibility of pushing for particular policy planks in party platforms, especially the Democratic party, the persistent efforts to see that they are implemented, and the mobilization of broad-based support for such policies constitute a real challenge.

It is clear that social workers, if they are to improve their effectiveness in the policy-making arena, must collaborate not only with the politicians who are in sympathy with the causes they espouse, but with other groups as well, notably consumer and client groups. In such collaboration a realistic understanding of the policy process and the obvious limits in any attempt to influence policy changes is essential. Social workers need to master new skills, especially those that will be necessary if the profession responds to the demand for emphasis on the developmental thrust. These include skills in policy analysis, development of social indicators; evaluation of the impact of social and economic policies, interdisciplinary team effort, developmental planning, resource allocation, brokerage, advocacy, and the ability to organize/work with interest groups, low

income groups and cultural and ethnic minority groups.

Perhaps, as has been suggested, social workers have to learn to be opportunists without betraying long-term goals. Are there ways of arriving at compromises without throwing social work values overboard? Could forces that are opposed or indifferent be used resourcefully? Policy agreements can bring together the strangest bedfellows — individuals of different ideological positions. It has, for instance, been suggested that the continuing support in Congress for extension of OASI benefits arises from the desire of liberals to strengthen the welfare programmes of the federal government, and the desire of conservatives to minimize demands by unions for private pension plans.<sup>9</sup> In attempting to influence policy changes the social work profession will have to work increasingly with various interest groups, and seek the kinds of compromises that make possible support for specific policies from groups with different interests and motivations.

#### *New Directions in Social Work Education and Practice*

In a sense the response of the profession to the challenge of policy formulation and change in the future will depend to an appreciable extent on the educational preparation of social workers. Much has happened since Eveline Burns and others focused attention on the need to give social policy an important place in social work training which calls for critical appraisal, questioning and assessment.<sup>10</sup> There is the need for an ongoing evaluation of professional educational objectives and the opportunity afforded for understanding and developing skills in policy formulation and change. Whom are we training? And for what? How do we see ourselves in relation to other professions, particularly in regard to planning and policy

formulation? The social work profession will have to address itself to these and related questions in the effort to develop curricula that are relevant to the changes and newer demands made on the profession.

Increasingly, the social work profession will have to concentrate on preparing practitioners for responsibility in regard to the developmental function, in addition to remedial and preventive functions. This emphasis on the developmental function calls for new emphases and changes in the curriculum." Education for social work practice, in addition to ensuring competence in methods of working with people, will also have to emphasize competence in substantive areas related to policy, such as economic organization, political process, social justice, cultural and ethnic relations, and the demands of citizens' groups. In addition to the traditional social work concerns, the areas of resource development and allocation, integrative approach to social and economic policies, advocacy planning, developmental systems change and policy change — all will demand the most creative curricular thinking.

The developmental function, involving close ties with the policy process and decisions regarding allocation of resources, will necessitate preparation for greater competence in policy analysis, planning, evaluation of impact of policies, team effort, interdisciplinary collaboration, and work with political leaders and minority groups. Special competence will have to be developed in working with ethnic minorities and cultural groups, in understanding their aspirations, in developing policies that ensure greater justice for them, and in evaluating the impact of such policies.

The fact that the policy process is confused, that it is not always possible to determine who makes policy or "whom or what the social worker is supposed to influence",

should not deter social work educator from making serious efforts to help the student to understand realistically the policy process, the conflicts, the compromise solutions that emerge, and to equip them with a range of skills necessary for working in this area. It is to be seen as part of the general challenge in practically all fields of education today to focus on the discovery of the unknown, for coping with the situation of change, and for developing a different sense of competence.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Factors to Consider in Influencing Policy Changes*

A brief attempt is made here to focus on some of the specific factors that social workers will have to take into account increasingly in efforts to change policy. Efforts at policy changes in some situations could, for example, be initiated at the local level and through state legislatures. Some maintain that the main effort by social work in introducing social reform or social policy changes will be within the local community context.<sup>13</sup> State legislatures and governors could also be helpful in supporting policies advocated at the national level.

The strategy of urging political parties to include specific policy planks in their party platform could mobilise support for particular policies and facilitate further public debate and understanding. It is also important in this context to use, so far as possible, forces favouring social reforms as well as forces opposed to social reform. Those who oppose reform, or particular policy changes, may help to focus more attention on issues, and public understanding of them, by the controversies which they engender. Independent, non-governmental forces could also make a vital contribution in introducing changes in policies and programmes.

The news media — the press, the television network, and the radio — are also

important sources for influencing policy. The press can influence congressmen by focusing on particular issues. The timing and the manner in which issues are presented seems crucial. Such devices as news releases, letters to the editor, and controversial articles and debates, to promote wider public interest and understanding on issues, should be exploited to the full.

There are also many ways in which social workers can influence legislators at both the national and state levels: personal contacts, written communications, transmitting resolutions of organizations and petitions signed by large numbers of persons. There could be meetings between social workers and legislators to consider specific issues. Mass rallies and protest marches, carefully timed and planned, can have impact. Individual social workers may also support and work actively for legislators in their political campaigns. Writing to the President, making group representations, sending petitions regarding particular issues all have their important place.

In all this, the selection of appropriate strategies, the keeping of alternative course open, and the timing of action are crucial for success. What is needed most are an alliance of interest groups that will help to achieve the goals pursued, and a realistic acceptance of the fact that goals may not be attained *in toto*, that compromises may be necessary.

A further factor which the social work strategies, the keeping of alternative courses attempting to influence policy decisions, and to speak on behalf of the disenfranchised and the poor, is the extent to which the policy system as it operates today is open to new participants or groups. It is evident that large numbers of individuals, who are not sufficiently organized or who do not have "institutionalized interests in policy outcomes," have, at best, a limited voice in the policy process. It seems vital that the policy system be made more "responsive" and "adaptable" to the needs and demands of such persons.<sup>14</sup>

In social policy a basic objective is to provide people with a greater degree of choice and participation. However, for the many who are poor and disenfranchised, the extent of independence and freedom of action extended as a right is still a "mirage."<sup>15</sup> New structures and mechanisms for broad-based participation will have to be developed to ensure that policy target groups have a voice in the shaping of policy. Increasingly, the social work profession will have to concern itself with determining how and to what extent societal goals and policies contribute to social justice and equality. A related issue will be whether the main emphasis in social policy is to be social control or social change. These are basic and persistent issues to which the profession will have to address itself increasingly in the future in its efforts to influence social policy changes.

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FOOTNOTES :

1. Reference is made for example in *Community Organization Curriculum in Graduate Social Work Education: Report and Recommendations*. Arnold Gurin New York; published by CSWE, 1970 of the need to prepare future practitioners for intervention in the policy area and the value of making intercultural comparisons in social policy. Likewise, a study undertaken in the United Kingdom, *Community Work and Social Change: A Report on Training*. London: Longman Group Ltd., 1970, comments on the significance of moves towards an integrative approach in social policy. National and international conferences in social welfare have also been focusing on the role of social workers in social policy change. The theme of the 1972 (XVIIth) International Conference on Social Welfare held in The Hague, Netherlands, 1972, was "Developing Social Policy in Conditions of Rapid Change."
2. Alan D. Wade. "The Social Worker in the Political Process," *The Social Welfare Forum*, 1966. New York: Columbia University Press, p.55.
3. United Nations. *Proceedings of the International Conference of Ministers Responsible for Social Welfare*. New York, 1969.
4. Charles S. Levy. "The Social Worker as Agent of Policy Change," *Social Case Work*. Vol. 51, No. 2, February, 1970, p. 105.
5. See Clarke A. Chambers. *Seedtime of Reform*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1967, p. 264. See also: Clarke A. Chambers. "An Historical Perspective on Political Action vs. Individualized Treatment," *Current Issues in Social Work Seen in Historical Perspective*, CSWE, 1962.

6. See Charles S. Levy. "The Social Worker as Agent of Policy Change," *Social Case Work. Op. Cit.*, pp. 103-104.
7. See; Alan K. Campbell. "Decision-Makers in Social Policy," *The Social Welfare Forum*, 1970. New York: Columbia University Press, 1970, pp. 80-87.
8. Peter M. Rossi. "Power and Politics: A Road to Social Reform," *Social Service Review*. Vol. XXXV, No. 4 (December, 1961), p. 368.
9. Charles E. Lindblom. "The Science of 'Muddling Through'," *Readings in American Political Behavior*. Raymond E. Wolfinger, Ed. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966, p. 219.
10. See Eveline M. Burns. "Social Policy: The Step Child of the Curriculum," *Proceedings of Ninth Annual Program Meeting. CSWE*, New York, 1961, pp. 23-34. See also Arnold Gurin. *Community Organization Curriculum in Graduate Social Work Education: Reports and Recommendation. op. cit.*
11. See Herman D. Stein. "Social Welfare and Development: Education and Training for the Seventies," in *Social Work Education in the Seventies. XVth Congress of Schools of Social Work, Manila, Philippines, IASSW, 1970*. See also John B. Turner. "Education for Practice with Minorities," in *Social Work*. Vol. 17, No. 3, May 1972.
12. Louis Lowy. "Whither Social Work Education and Social Change?" *Journal of Education for Social Work, CSWE*, Vol. 4, No. 1, New York, 1968, p. 32.
13. Peter H. Rossi. "Power and Politics: A Road to Social Reform," *Social Service Review. op. cit.*, p. 359.
14. See Eugene Eidenberg and Roy D. Morey. *An act of Congress: The Legislative Process and the Making of Education Policy*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969, pp. 242-243.
15. Joan L. M. Eyden. *Social Policy in Action*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, p. 83.

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