Role of the Social Worker

What might be called the ‘human face’ of welfare is represented by social workers, and in certain important respects by community development workers. For this reason they are sometimes said to offer different and competing solutions for the same problems. As will become apparent, though both are of great importance they are dissimilar in both their methods and their functions.

Social Work

Social work is commonly understood to mean finding a solution to a person’s difficulties through personal discussion with him. Its critics see this kind of individualised casework as unrealistic because the human problems it seeks to tackle are social in nature, arising out of social conditions and relationships, and having consequences which extend beyond the individual immediately concerned.

This might be particularly the case in the countries of the South, where people are more used to discussion within a family or other group than in the one-to-one privacy which characterises an individual interview with a caseworker (Shamsiah, 1981). Djamour (1959) writes: ‘To be surrounded by members of his family helps give a Malay a sense of security . . . and there was a particular dread of solitude.’ In South Africa, there is a Bantu saying, ‘Umuntu ungumuntu ngabantu’, which means ‘Man is man through, with and in association with other persons’ (Dlamini, 1984) and expresses the group-mindedness of the African with enviable clarity.
Because social work method concentrates on the individual and adjustment to society, it is also charged with being manipulative and supportive of an often unjust status quo as against social reform. Pearson writes in this connection about 'social work as the privatised solution to public ills' (Pearson, 1973). In Third World context this bias is seen as even more harmful in distracting attention and precious funds from social policies aimed at reducing poverty and improving health services and environmental conditions.

These strictures are based on an out-of-date conception of social work. Modern social workers are only too well aware of the importance of the family and the community, and have developed techniques of groupwork and community care which give expression to it. Nor are they blind to the contribution made to the problems of individuals by injustices in society, and so they accept responsibility for ensuring that clients gain access to such welfare resources as are available. But they go beyond this, seeing political action to change social conditions as an important part of their professional function. There certainly is no doubt about the need for such improvements in social provision in the Third World. That will already be obvious to anyone who has read this far. The case has been made in earlier chapters for even more radical forms of social restructuring, directed against the evil of dependent underdevelopment.

At the same time, it has to be recognised that the social reform activities of social workers will be limited by their relationship to their employers. They are public officials and as such are expected to implement the policies of their political masters, not to engage in political activity against those policies. Fortunately another route is open to them. They are often able to 'reform the system' through the recognition of their expertise within that system, perhaps even to influence the formation of policies from the outset.

Meanwhile there are many tasks for them to perform with clients. Suppose there were no social caseworkers to accept responsibility, for example, for the abandoned or orphan children found wandering around Third World cities, like those in Malawi referred to by Kadzamira (1975)? Some of them find work in the informal sector, shining shoes, hawking, working as guides to blind or crippled beggars and so on. Others beg for themselves,