

## The Spinoffs Associated with the Welfare System in Selected Countries and the Implications for Social Work Practice

Tatenda Manomano<sup>1</sup> and Simon Kang'ethe<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Social Work, University of the Free State, Box 9300 Bloemfontein, South Africa*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Social Work and Social Development, University of Fort Hare, Box X1314, King Williamstown Road, Alice 5700, South Africa*

*E-mail: <sup>1</sup><ManomanoT@ufs.ac.za>, <sup>2</sup><Skang'ethe@ufh.ac.za>*

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**ABSTRACT** Worldwide, conditions of poverty have reached unprecedented levels that require solutions to possibly abate the situation. This paper explores reasons the welfare system fails, with a special focus on Australia and South Africa, to address these conditions and to document implications for social work practice. A literature review methodology was used to locate the background for welfare provisioning and approach as a basis for discussion. Findings point towards excessive dependence by prospective and present beneficiaries on the government's finances to provide welfare. Further, inconsistencies through risk, time and context aggravate and dampen welfare policy and its effectiveness to address mixed problems faced by the people, while the global problem of homelessness is also not being adequately addressed resulting in social and health implications. Promulgating a pro-poor policy research approach, and eliciting the dynamics of people's problems accurately and timeously can enable governments to minimize risk.

### INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the literature pertaining to the welfare system draws the researchers to delve biasedly with countries that display strong welfare system such as Australia and South Africa for possible analysis of the possible milestones and pitfalls associated with the welfare system at large. Taking Australia as a case in point, it is one of the countries with a well-developed welfare system. Characteristically, the country fits into the category and domain of a developed country, as well as it espouses the characteristics befitting a developed country. It also boasts of a robust and fast growing economy that attracts a lot of attention especially from the rest of the world, but more so economic migrants (Gray and Aglias 2010). With regards to population, statistical projections indicate it to have 23,860,893 people based on the resident population from 31<sup>st</sup> December 2014, a figure consistent with the Australian Demographic Statistics of December Quarter 2014 (cat.no.3101.0) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015). The country is also known to rank highly in terms of quality of life, health and education among other things. Statistically and in terms of the gender divide, there are more females than males residing in cities whereas in other areas, there are slightly more males than females (Australian Bureau of

Statistics 2015). Anecdotal evidence also point out that the preponderance of females over males in cities could be due to the fact that most females prefer to reside in cities in accordance with their inherent desire to live a married life (Boyle et al. 2014). Despite the huge mass of wealth in this country, it could hoodwink one to imagine and resonate that there is no existence of poverty. However, evidence abounds that the aborigines could be the poorest people in the world (Brennan 2006 as cited by Serr 2006). In taking the matter further, reliable statistics reveal that a relatively high number of aborigines are forever trapped in a snare of poverty. Painstakingly speaking, they are born into poverty and die in poverty. They face innumerable limitations in their socioeconomic pursuit and their life expectancy stands at 20 years or less on average (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001a as cited by Serr 2006). Fingering some of the challenges among a constellation of them includes poor access to education, and poor access to adequate housing and health. Notable critics provide arguments that highlight that the circumstances of aboriginal people are due to their longtime dependency and if the situation is to be in anyway absolved, focus should concentrate on reducing dependency to make them socially responsible citizens like other Australians. They need to be subjected to a process of welfare reform

that is likely to challenge their expectations, thinking and the way they conceptualize their life and vision generally. The reform process should strategically work on the vice of dependency syndrome. Other writers allude that the state of affairs for aboriginal people has its history from the colonial time of dispossession and exclusion, and every policy and debate is questionable in terms of whether it is progressive or regressive in pursuing their liberation, whether economically or socially. It also brings about a salient picture that poverty is defined differently between the Australians and the aboriginal people. Striking a comparison between the two sides, many aboriginal people experience both relative and absolute poverty, which reduces their chances of accessing a decent standard of life (Serr 2006). This being only one classical example, the country of South Africa reputed to be one of Africa's economic powerhouse and one of the biggest welfare country in Africa appears to slump most of the welfare beneficiaries into a state of economic dependence and therefore not tending to graduate from the problem that the welfare system intends to address. Although it has many social welfare programs such as grants and subsidies for housing among other things, complaints regarding their failure to guarantee the beneficiaries satisfaction and contentment raise a lot of questions (Kang'ethe et al. 2015; Manomano 2015).

### **Problem Statement**

Although in the global records the countries of South Africa and Australia are considered to be some of the world's developed countries with huge economic marshal and a bigger welfare system at their disposal, it is apparent that the two countries are clouded with a constellation of challenges that appear to stifle their welfare system from accruing the expected optimal dividends. In the South African perspective, other than the welfare input displayed in paying the fees and the feeding program of the school students, that register success upon the students exiting from the schools, and also the support of the older persons and other vulnerable members of the society who due to their circumstances may not be able to work, apparently the large part of the South African welfare system does not appear to facilitate a process of most of its beneficiaries graduating from being needy to

attaining some degree of autonomy and independence. They remain ever needy. In the same vein, Australia, although with a huge welfare system, faces acute economic imbalances among its citizens whose beneficiaries only graduate at a snail's pace. The situation in the two countries presents a huge challenge because the welfare system costs the country billions of the taxpayers' money prompting a need to assess the socioeconomic impacts it espouses to the host of the beneficiaries. Also, observed and recorded problems in these two countries, (although perhaps not in the same magnitude) highlight that more and more people are being trapped into the vicious circle of poverty through failing to secure employment, basic housing as well as through excessively depending on the welfare grants. Painstakingly, the governments through the expenditure of the taxpayers' money is reeling under the financial burden placed on its shoulders year-in-year-out. Optimistically, a proper and a well-coordinated welfare system should largely turn around the lives of its beneficiaries to a point where they can positively change their own economic aspects of their lives. This would give the other oncoming beneficiaries an opportunity to benefit from the system. It is therefore critical that the spinoffs associated with the welfare system of both these countries are well discussed and debated with the hope of coming up with pragmatic and plausible recommendations to address the quagmire.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This paper used a literature review methodology through consulting welfare written books, journals and news research papers as well as other literature regarding the welfare system. Importantly, the intuition and the work experience of both the researchers have been instrumental in shaping and conceptualizing the research paper.

### **OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **Obstacles to the Welfare System in both Australia and South Africa**

This section seeks to draw observations and elicit debate regarding the obstacles militating against the welfare system for both Australia and South Africa. The observation is central in

order to lay the ground for possible plausible avenues to strengthen the already instituted programs and services. This is critical in order to effectuate and achieve their goals gracefully.

### *Addiction and/or Dependence on Welfare*

Whilst other countries especially in the developing world experience real endemic levels of poverty, for Australia it is not necessarily a poverty problem, but an increasing dependence and addiction to welfare. This has created an anti-developmental wave that is retrogressive to the lives of a larger section of the welfare recipients. Perhaps this observation is critical so that countries such as South Africa whose section of the welfare beneficiaries also appear to display the same characteristic of dependence and anti-development attitude can work in tandem with countries such as Australia in an endeavor to surmount the undesirable phenomenon of dependence syndrome. Addiction or dependence on welfare is a serious vice that if not checked can cause the concerned countries to move forward at a snail's pace towards their growth and participation of a larger segment of the society towards their Gross Domestic Product (GDP). But perhaps it is not clear who to point a finger at, either the welfare beneficiary who may be accused of complacency, laziness, lack of vision and generally embracing a culture of apathy, or the governmental instruments of managing and running the welfare system. These researchers think that the two sides of the coin both hold a share of blame. However, the administration aspects and machinery of the welfare need to carry the lion's share of it. This is because of not coming with plausible and rationalized strategies that will challenge the beneficiaries to think outside the box and wish not to be associated with the welfare system. Ironically, these researchers think that perhaps inculcating some degree or dosage of stigma to the phenomenon of welfare could work well in order to dissuade people to wish to be welfare beneficiaries for good. But the problem is that if the welfare system was to inhere some dosage of stigma, it may also not augur well for some beneficiaries such as the elderly who may not have any avenue of coming out of the welfare basket. This, however, indicates the complex and multifaceted phenomenon of discharging welfare in countries such as Australia and South Africa. In

his visit to Melbourne in 2014, one of the researchers engaged one of the professors who agreed that even if the country of Australia was doing well in offering the unemployed packages of welfare grants, in order to cushion the effects of unemployment and by extension poverty, the professor agreed that the government had not come up with plausible and rationalized options of making the beneficiaries not wish to be in the welfare club for long. Perhaps this calls for the social workers to think outside the box and advise the governments discharging the welfare grants on ways to accompany welfare with some stringent conditions, for example, having the relatively younger and the unemployed sign some declarations that they will pay off the money that they have been receiving in form of welfare upon receiving employment. This can augur very well for the younger people who may be using grants in form of fees. The beneficiaries need to embrace the vision of accountability. Importantly also, the discharge of welfare should be accompanied by education of accountability and the need to recognize that the money advanced is part of the taxpayers' money. Perhaps such measures could go a long way in planting seeds of accountability and a feeling of some degree of stigma, if one continues to receive the welfare without the wish to graduate from the system. In South Africa, some beneficiaries of RDP houses are selling and renting them out (Kang'ethe and Manomano 2015) while some dissatisfied ones turn them into tuck shops and shanties (Matlala 2011) forgetting that the intended objective of the houses was to provide those without a house to have access to one (Kang'ethe and Manomano 2015). Not only is this occurring in areas of housing provisioning, but also in social grants prompting the citizens to view them as bona fide income. This explains why about thirty-five percent of the South Africans rely only on grants as the only source of income (Gutura 2014).

Perhaps it is good to indicate that the state of welfare between Australia and South Africa differ hugely. While, for example, the policy to introduce the youth's unemployment welfare grant is still at the nascent stage of its implementation, in Australia, the unemployment welfare has been operational for some time now if not decades. For example, the current circumstances of unemployed couples with two children demonstrate that they enjoy USD 37,190

per year in social security payments from the taxpayer's money excluding any other indirect federal or state government assistance as reported by the Melbourne Institute (Creighton 2014). On the same note, a single mother with four children is eligible to get USD 45,344 per year, which is also part of income tax (Creighton 2014). It is no secret why other scholars opine that the welfare system perhaps because it is not accompanied by stringent education and tough measures tends to encourage people to have more children with payments of USD 85 per week per child despite other pressing demands and needs that come with children. The same kind of thinking and behavior prevail in South Africa where mothers especially from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have more children as each child carries its own child grant. The situation in South Africa is made worse by the policy adjustments that adjusted the age at which a mother can start receiving the child grant from 18 years to 16 years. Perhaps that policy adjustment should attract critical debate and arguments. For one, the policymakers may have observed the age at which many young mothers are bearing children and therefore considered the need to have the children born be helped as bona fide citizens of the country. On the other hand, such an adjustment can be viewed as an irrational one, one lacking vision and one that encourages children to be mothers at an early age. This has negative consequences especially for the elderly mothers who are left with the newborn babies while the young mothers get on with other life challenges. This, as one of the elderly parents who holds membership with the Lavela home for the elderly in Nzelamanzi township of Eastern Cape in South Africa quipped, is a phenomenon of making the elderly stressed, despondent and having to renew their nurturance roles, while they themselves need to be assisted. It is a process of driving the elderly to the graves fast.

Therefore, despite the gains associated with the discharge of welfare, because indeed they are there, for example, of ensuring the vulnerable groups attain some modest form of living, it has its spinoffs that put the countries in a state of jeopardy. It is these spinoffs that need the attention of the social workers and government agents (Creighton 2014). In South Africa, for example, other researchers have established that child support grants increase tendencies of teen-

age pregnancy as well as dependency from the targeted beneficiaries (Gutura 2014).

### ***Welfare System a Burden to the Taxpayers and the Government***

As much as the discharge of welfare may be a necessary phenomenon, especially to cushion the states of abject and filthy poverty, it is indeed a process of draining national coffers (James and James 2012). For example, in Australia, the welfare budget is unfathomably very high. Kevin Andrews, the Minister of Social Services reported that one in five Australians received some form of income support in 2012 from the government at a cost of USD 70 billion (Woodley 2014). This according to the Minister poses a heavy burden on the federal government. This is a point about which something needs to be done to ease the burden because the situation is unsustainable. Notably, the critical areas that require urgent and stringent attention include assisting the disabled persons and the payment of the unemployment benefits (Whiteford 2014). However, it is notable that the number of people on these assistance systems is increasing geometrically when compared to those exiting the welfare programs. This causes serious concerns with the situation begging for explanations of the rationale in vain. Others opine that it is not only the welfare system to blame, but also barriers to work such as labor market programs, which do not address unique backgrounds and skills as well as lack of job opportunities in the regions where people reside, poor public transport, inadequate child care, mismatched skills and negative employer attitudes. This horde of factors leaves most people with no good option but to be complacent with the welfare system as part of their life (Whiteford 2014). The situation has left the government in a state of crossroads without any solution to the quagmire. In South Africa alone, although social grants have been instituted as a tool of lifting people out of poverty, it is of concern that funding for social security is increasingly becoming a burden, which will only overwhelm the government until it cannot contain it anymore with the likelihood of the system collapsing. The situation prompted in 2009 for the then Minister of Social Development to wonder whether funding the discharge of welfare in the country was sustainable. The bill for the welfare in 2009 was close to 89 billion

(Kang'ethe 2014). Reliable findings have predicted that by 2026, if the trends of welfare provision continue without adjustments, it could completely swallow all of the South African government's income (Ferreira 2015).

### ***Inconsistency and Inability to Deal with Risk on Time and Context***

Perhaps a critical characteristic of the Australian social welfare system is its state of inconsistency and inability to deal with risk on time and context. These researchers think that the phenomenon is likely to usher in hurried and ad hoc decisions in order to handle the stalemate. This may also indicate the incapacitation and unpreparedness of the welfare system to handle the welfare cases as they strike. However, some circumstances that entrench citizens in poverty vary, as others may face long time challenges to secure employment while others may fail to secure the resources that can help them ameliorate the terrain of poverty. Unfortunately, the phenomenon of handling the risks that calls for the welfare timeously has been a characteristic of the system in Australia. This is probably driven by the feeling by the government agents that the individuals need to first tackle and put the responsibilities on their two shoulders before any offload help can be considered. Perhaps the phenomenon of the government dragging its feet could be a strategy to dissuade many entrants into the system. What is difficult to swallow is why are these families' circumstances not individually investigated, monitored and supported based on their severity (Sheen 2014). Perhaps this also points to the need to upgrade the level of supervision into the details of the phenomenon leading the individual to be a candidate of need. This, if done, can possibly help ensure that funds are effectively and efficiently utilized. Perhaps it is also important for the agents of the government to adequately borrow and use the principles of the sustainable livelihoods approach in maximizing the sustainability of welfare provisioning (Morse and McNamara 2013).

However, perhaps the scenario and terrain debated above is not only a reserve of Australia, but also fits and finds description in South Africa. The country also faces the quagmire of not handling the risks timeously and with serious consideration befitting the cases. Sometimes, one would hear that some professionals

such as the teachers are still in the basket of the welfare beneficiaries while the real needy people may be rotting in the queue to access the welfare grants. Importantly, welfare should consider the very needy cases such as helping the households of those facing terminal illnesses, such as HIV/AIDS, who may be in huge need.

### ***Addressing the State of the Homeless in Both Australia and South Africa***

Just like South Africa that is globally known for its massive welfare project policy of Reconstruction and Development Policy (RDP) whose goal is to ensure all the South Africans live in modest low income houses (Manomano 2013; Kang'ethe and Manomano 2015), Australia also follows the same policy of fighting tooth and nail, the phenomenon of homelessness among its vulnerable population. This is to ensure that the low-income people also enjoy a relatively modest standard of living. This is also a measure and an attempt to close the huge lacunae of socioeconomic imbalances in the country (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015). Perhaps it is good for these researchers to indicate the thinking of the Australian government agents when they consider the meaning of homelessness. The country heavily borrows and embraces the meaning from the United Nations charters that take the concept of homelessness to mean a state of dwelling that is inadequate, without tenure, severely overcrowded and one disallowing social relations among other things (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2012 as cited by Homelessness Australia 2016). Further, homelessness has serious implications and ramifications such as being associated with phenomena such as domestic violence, substance abuse and mental health problems, with higher chances of suffering economic malaise. This case has been found to be evident in areas of poor houses where some of the residents face addiction to substance abuse and some falling victims to the jaws of domestic violence with a painful story of a grandmother who was raped in her house in golf course estate of Alice Township of Cape Province (Manomano 2013). Although in 2008 the federal government of Australia promised to halve people without homes by 2020 through a funding in billions, it appears that the 2011 census gave evidence that this promise was far from being fulfilled, as 105,000

people in 2013 were still without a place they could call home (Baille 2013). In tandem, South Africa manifests the same scenario where millions are still lacking a decent home even though promises to house all had been made public (Pep 2014). Gravely also, malpractices in form of maladministration and corruption have been a common place of the RDP houses in South Africa (Manomano 2013). For example, in 2013 alone, the office of the Public Protector received 2000 reports regarding various malpractices and inconsistencies pertaining to irregularities in the distribution of the RDP houses (Corruption Watch 2013). In terms of age group, the youth in Australia are the hardest hit by the state of homelessness with fifty-six percent of them having an unmet request for a bed each night (Bita 2010), while seventeen percent of those who are homeless are those aged over 55 years and seven percent of them being over 65 years of age (Mental Health Council of Australia 2009). Further, thousands of people are unsure about where they will sleep from one night to the other, as they are in queue to be allocated a house. Perhaps the seriousness of homelessness was captured by Baille (2013) in 2013 when a resident in a wheelchair was in the queue to be allocated a decent permanent housing. However, the government managed the case by paying USD 800 every two weeks. Moreover, other reports from Australia pertaining to the state of homelessness have not been pleasant. This is because of the report that sixty-five percent of the people requiring mental health care have also not been prioritized in accessing them with houses. This is a situation that can exacerbate their mental health conditions (Mental Health Council of Australia 2009). Indubitably, the discussions above, however, show a deepening crisis that needs robust attention to ensure that housing as a basic need is taken seriously by both the federal government and other stakeholders. In New South Wales, for example, a recent plan was announced in the beginning of 2016 surrounding the housing plan by both the government and the non-government stakeholders, but as echoed by a social worker, there is need to pragmatically detail how this funding will be utilized to avoid private benefits along with assisting vulnerable people (ABC Riverina 2016). This is because there is a tendency that funding meant for poor people is in most cases abused and misused until it results in poor housing programs

(Manomano 2013). Comparatively, South Africa still faces arduous challenge of administering its RDP program. According to the work of Manomano (2013), the program lacks sound administrative machinery, is riddled with an assortment of malpractices and produces houses with quality that does not meet the international quality litmus test. This has resulted in chaos between beneficiaries and housing administrators. For example, in Grahamstown, residents of RDP houses ended up in a fight with the housing administrators, as they demanded clarity and transparency on the housing projects (Abahlali Base Mujondolo 2013). Perhaps this analysis helps correct the attitude that it is only developing countries that face serious state of homelessness. Immense research should therefore be strengthened in both developed and developing countries to investigate not only the state of homelessness, but also the quality of housing especially with respect to the United Nations description of a qualitative house (Kang'ethe and Manomano 2015; Manomano and Tangwe 2015).

## CONCLUSION

It is critical that countries discharging welfare form serious strategies to dissuade the welfare beneficiaries from viewing welfare as their right. The beneficiaries need to be educated that the phenomenon costs taxpayers' money. With literature abounding that the discharge of welfare is a strenuous burden on the governments, it is critical that robust research is conducted to lay bare all the possible factors that can facilitate a paradigm shift of the beneficiaries' attitudes towards welfare. It is unfortunate that while Australia's welfare beneficiaries have sunk into a perfidious state of dependence syndrome and dependence, the South African beneficiaries are equally drifting to the same. Importantly, the two governments need to seriously educate beneficiaries so that they wish to graduate from it. Obligatory also, the governments need to ensure they institute measures such as making the beneficiaries liable to pay the welfare upon getting employed. The notion of free welfare should be erased from the beneficiaries' minds.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The need for a pro-poor policy research framework and monitoring and evaluation can-

not be overemphasized for the welfare system. Since social work is a profession concerned with the wellbeing of the people, it is therefore pertinent for their inclusion in the decision-making pertaining to strategies of welfare, policy formulation as well as in empirical research into the welfare system. Further, social work needs to broaden its advocacy approach on the welfare system through lobbying, launching campaigns and raising awareness especially about challenges that the vulnerable lot face, whether the poor, the disabled, or the mentally ill. This is to facilitate the governments to tighten their seat belts, and exercise extreme caution on welfare provisioning. Perhaps broadening and ensuring welfare studies to keep track of the current trends of the welfare system should be mandatory in the social work curriculum as this could possibly equip the professionals in their role as well as how to intervene meaningfully. Importantly also, the governments need to create an enabling environment not only for social workers' advocacy, but also for the inclusion of other civil bodies and the private sector. Perhaps offering tax incentives to those individuals and bodies that would partner with the government in providing welfare support to the poor in the country can be an important national gesture.

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