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SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL ISSUES: THE CARIBBEAN

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In making remarks on Social Work in the Caribbean, it is necessary to clarify that the region is a diverse one comprised of Hispanic, Francophone, Dutch and Anglophone countries which have had different patterns of development and remain in most respects separate entities. The focus of this presentation will be on the Anglophone Caribbean - those countries who shared the experience of British colonial rule for 200-300 years and amongst whom the structure and system of social services has been developed along the lines of British service models.

The English speaking Caribbean represents about six million people in islands which range from some with populations of 10-20,000, through others with approximately 100,000, the Bahamas and Barbados each with near 250,000, Trinidad with 1.3 million and Jamaica with 2.5 million. Belize, with a population of 200,000 and Guyana, with a population of 800,000 are the two mainland territories included in this grouping.

In the nations with smaller populations, social services are popularly offered by multi service workers and it is only in the larger countries that the division of specialized services known in the metropolitan[1] countries is experienced.

Throughout the region there is a low proportion of trained social workers among the service providers. Many social work functions are performed by untrained personnel but there are also some undertaken by persons with other qualifications which are given some measure of recognition.

The range of social problems cited in this brief overview are most prevalent in the larger or more populous islands and Guyana and in the significant urban settlements - i.e. communities with populations ranging from 30-40,000 in a number of islands to that of greater Kingston (Jamaica) with some 800,000.

CLASSIC FEATURES OF THIRD WORLD POVERTY

What may be regarded as "classic" features of poverty in developing countries can be seen in the Caribbean. These features include: poor housing, unemployment and violence.

- Very poor and overcrowded housing conditions exist in low income ghettoes, seen at their worst in Jamaica where they stand in sharp contrast to the very ostentatious residences of the wealthy elite. The sub-standard living conditions have a deleterious effect on family living.
- Throughout most of the Caribbean area there is high unemployment (ranging from 15%-25%) and a significant incidence of underemployment-especially among the teenage and young adult populations.
- There is serious escalation in the number and severity of crimes,

particularly in the more urban areas. Violent crime has reached alarming and notorious proportions in Jamaica and the incidence in Trinidad and Guyana is also disturbing.

OTHER FEATURES OF THE WEST INDIAN CONDITION

Major social problems either associated with or otherwise increasing the impact of those mentioned above are:

- substance abuse and trafficking of both marijuana (principally from Jamaica) and the more notorious hard drugs, the latter being imported for transhipment. The geographic location of the entire Caribbean area between drug producing countries such as Columbia in South America and the drug markets of North America has exacerbated the problem. The nature of the drug culture is seen as a major factor in the growing phenomenon of violent crime.

- various manifestations of family breakdown and increasing incidence of or awareness of child abuse. These are recognized as being related not only to situations of economic deprivation and need but also to the effect of disruptions in traditional family life styles and behavioral roles.

- the awesome spread of HIV and the AIDS virus has posed a new crisis, with the incidence being most acute in Bahamas and in Trinidad.

CURRENT DELIVERY OF SOCIAL WORK SERVICES

In the following section, most references are to the Jamaican scene, the largest West Indian population, but most are applicable to the region as a whole.

Rehabilitative services are offered in the areas of Family and Child Welfare, Corrections, Substance Abuse and, except for one or two countries (e.g. Trinidad) to a more limited extent in the field of Mental Health. The primary agencies are state funded but a number of small non-governmental organizations (N.G.O.'s) also offer services - especially for children and families. The shortcomings of most of the rehabilitation and developmental services cited may be summarized as follows: They are usually inadequately staffed and insufficient to serve the client demand and the need for service. Documentation in certain services is decidedly limited and, in most, little or no attention is given to research. With very few exceptions, effective advocacy to impact policy making is absent.

Regional governments all offer programs of youth development and leadership training and promote community development/community economic development projects.

There is a very low proportion of trained social workers offering services in most agencies and salaries are almost uniformly poor. The attrition rate of trained personnel is high, with persons either moving to human resource management roles in the industrial sector or joining other poorly paid professionals in immigrating to the metropolitan countries.

EXAMPLES OF RECENT POSITIVE PROGRAM INITIATIVES IN THE REGION

There are, however, some promising new efforts in the social service field across the region. From the N.G.O. sector and often with international funding support, most of the countries in the region have an increasing number of small development agencies focusing on community economic development, with the more progressive ones promoting a community empowerment ethic. They organize primarily in rural communities, attempting to stem the urban drift. Some projects are also present in low income urban areas. In Jamaica, an umbrella coordinating body called the Association of Development Agencies (A.D.A.) facilitates systems linkages by publishing a regular newsletter, offering help in documentation, running "hands on" training for grass roots workers and community leaders, as well as serving a consultant or intermediary role in fund raising.

In Trinidad, social work practitioners have taken the initiative to establish task forces, organize forums and document data on child abuse. They have had some success to date in lobbying government to create improved family service agencies.

Programs to address substance abuse are being undertaken by regional governments with international funding. In Jamaica, the National Council for Drug Abuse has limited programs for treatment of drug users but major emphasis has been directed at preventive activities. Pilot communities have been targeted, and community development action committees (CODAC's) have been established comprised of representatives from community groups, local institutions and other social service agencies. These CODAC's seek to implement programs identified by community numbers which cater to the needs and interests of the youth in particular -- the population most at risk of becoming substance abusers.

CHALLENGE FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

A number of challenges lie ahead for social work education to increase both the quantity and the relevance of education for the profession. Several areas for work are outlined below.

The preparation and training of social workers needs to be expanded significantly. There are only between 350-400 persons in training throughout the region - most at the baccalaureate level. Immediate emphasis needs to be placed on developing a broad base of paraprofessionals to support the core of professionally trained service personnel in order to achieve a multiplier effect.

There is need to examine training models adopted from metropolitan countries, to make modifications and, where necessary, to develop indigenous practice theory such as may be found more culturally appropriate.

The focus of training needs to be less oriented to direct service (micro practice) to allow more attention for developing capabilities in organization, planning, policy development, and advocacy. Social work will not realize its potential as a profession to impact social problems in the West Indies until full recognition is given to the need to invest to a much greater extent in macro practice.

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[1]Metropolitan countries - countries with large, highly developed urban areas; usually refers to the more industrialized nations of the North.