Social Development: Synthesizing Theory and Practice

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This paper traces the trajectory of my thinking on social development shaped, initially, by the huge changes that swept South Africa in the 1990s. It describes my early focus on discerning what the policy-driven changes to a developmental welfare system meant for social work and the subsequent critical turn, as social development proved extremely difficult to translate to practice. It traces the changes in my thinking on coming to Australia in 1999, when the country was undergoing a period of massive welfare reform, firmly embedding neoliberal privatization policy. In reflecting on switching concepts in the social development discourse, the discussion turns to its embrace of neoliberalism. Thereafter, it considers three models to highlight the turn from centralized planning, which held the government responsible for social development, to social enterprise, which divested government of its responsibility, and a critical development model that linked national policy to the wider international system. Noting critiques of neoliberal social development, the discussion ends with the current trajectory of my thinking outlined in a critical model for developmental practice with the core foci being the structural–political, cultural–contextual, critical–developmental, and environmental–spiritual dimensions of social development.

Keywords: *social development, South Africa, Australia, neoliberalism, critical model*

Introduction

This paper traces the trajectory of my thinking on social development shaped, initially, by the huge changes that swept South Africa in the 1990s, at a time when there was very little understanding of what it entailed. My early optimism

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regarding its potential soon gave way to a more critical analysis, as it proved extremely difficult to translate to, and seemingly ineffective in, practice (Gray, 2010, 2020; Gray & Ariong, 2017). Crucial to this critical turn was my move to Australia in 1999, when it was in the throes of neoliberal welfare reform. I describe my switch in thinking and reflect on shifting concepts, theories, approaches, and models in the social development discourse arising from its increasing adoption of neoliberal thinking. I discuss aspects of neoliberal social development, three influential models, and critiques, and end with my thoughts on a critical developmental practice model to embrace its structural–political, cultural–contextual, critical–developmental, and environmental–spiritual dimensions.

Early Influences on my thinking on Social Development: 1990–2000

The dramatic changes that swept South Africa in the early 1990s shaped my perspective on social development introduced through the *White Paper for Social Welfare* (RSA, 1997). At the time, there was very little understanding of social development and the way in which it differed from social work and social welfare, and related endeavors, such as rural community development, primary healthcare, and adult education. As I saw it, there were three aspects to this policy transformation in need of unpacking. They were the theory of *social development;* the way in which it informed the transition to a *developmental welfare* system; and its implications for *developmental social work.* My early focus was to discern what these policy changes meant for social work, hence my early writings in this area (Gray, 1996a, 1996b, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1998a, 1998b, 2002; Neilson & Gray, 1997). I drafted my tentative ideas into a paper entitled *Towards an Understanding of Developmental Social Work* to provide my thoughts on the way in which social development might shape developmental social work in South Africa (Gray, 1996a). Further, I began to introduce these changes through social work education (Gray, 1994; Gray & Simpson, 1998; Gray, O'Brien, & Mazibuko, 1996; Travis, McFarlin, van Rooyen, & Gray, 1999).

Internationally, social development had been conceptualized as an alternative to conventional welfare that, by marrying social and economic goals, constituted a more comprehensive approach to social problems. Acknowledging poor people's right to development, it promised an equitable distribution of the benefits of economic growth (Gray, 1992). At the 1995 World Summit on Social Development, South Africa had committed itself to the eradication of social inequality, in so doing, creating the need for national anti-poverty strategies in line with global development policy. Influenced by Midgley (1995), who, like me, started his social work career in South Africa, I saw social development as a macro-policy perspective. I saw its counterparts, community development and developmental social work, as forms of strategic intervention that developed as practitioners attempted to apply social development theory to social work practice in contexts where poverty and under-development were a major concern (Gray, 1989, 1996a, 1996c, 1997c, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). Its policy blueprint, the *White Paper for Social*

Welfare (RSA, 1997), stated emphatically that developmental welfare should contribute to poverty eradication, using approaches that, among other things, discouraged welfare dependency, promoted the active involvement of poor people in their own development, involved a multifaceted and multisectoral approach, and encouraged partnership between welfare stakeholders. Its key proponents claimed that social development differed markedly from conventional consumption-based welfare (Midgley, 1995; Patel, 1992, 2005, 2008). To move to a social development paradigm, the government had to provide a concrete plan to support its development policies and resource their implementation, while removing institutional obstacles to a developmental welfare system. Thus, social development demanded a high degree of moral and political commitment based on ideals of equity and justice, and on the notion of rights that went far beyond human needs (Gray, 1992).

The guiding policy framework of the South African Bill of Rights contained clauses on social and economic rights but did not refer to the right to development. There was some resistance to a rights-based approach around concerns that the concession of rights, whether social, economic, cultural, or welfare, would lead to claims that the government could not honor. Why institute a right to development if the government could not deliver the entitlements it promised? However, this logic reflected a misunderstanding of the meaning and intention of rights-based development (Gray, 1994). It resulted from confusion between human rights bills as statements of intention and judicial law protecting legal claims. Human rights bills reflected moral and political ideals that guided the framing and application of law and social policy. They provided direction to respect, protect, and promote human rights to the maximum extent that available resources would allow.

However, there was no denying that human rights were central to social development, which acknowledged the relationship between social, political, and economic rights. Past failures to recognize this relationship had resulted in the perpetration of injustices in the name of development—the displacement of people, destruction of the environment, disempowerment of communities, and deterioration of land. Development did not automatically bring benefits; it required careful planning, adequate resourcing, and human rights observance. The final chapter of the short-lived *Reconstruction and Development Programme* (RDP) (RSA, 1994) had described its goals of democratizing the state and society. Part of this meant ensuring accountability for, and accessibility to, development that transferred power to ordinary people. In terms of these goals, people had individual and collective rights to participate in development, if they were to flourish, and the state had to create a responsive environment for the enjoyment of human rights; therefore, a human rights culture was essential if the macro-policy perspective of social development were to succeed. Further, being a multisectoral approach to poverty alleviation, social development required government sectors to work in concert for social upliftment and improvement and a massive infrastructure for the provision of employment, housing, electrification, water, roads, and sanitation that most of the population lacked.

Theoretically, development and economic growth were, until the advent of social development, synonymous. Social development theorists were at pains to shift this economic focus to an approach that recognized the social implications of development, arguing that it was a much richer concept than economic growth (Gray, 1992). Social development required those making economic policy and generating resources for development and social sectors involved in housing, education, and welfare provision to work in tandem for poverty alleviation and social improvement. It required comprehensive statist interventions to ensure integrated economic and social policies would result in tangible, positive gains for the poor. This was a positive step, given the trend in the Global North to reduce social expenditure and shift responsibility for welfare onto the private sector. As Midgley (1998) had observed, social development offered a "new rationale for government involvement in social welfare" (p. 90).

My early theorizing on developmental social work affirmed the profession's role in poverty eradication and recognized the link between welfare and development. Developmental social work diverged from the residual, service-oriented approach directed at special categories of people in need that used conventional resources, such as money and power, depleted through usage. Instead, it advocated holistic, people-centered, rights-based interventions that drew on vast nonconventional, nonmaterial resources, such as support networks, social solidarity, and local knowledge, depleted by nonusage. It had much in common with, but was not the same as, related endeavors, such as rural community development, primary healthcare, and adult education. Rural community development referred to a context (rural areas) and method of practice (community development) concerned with, among other things, agricultural and infrastructural development. Given the centrality of local community involvement and participation in the new developmental welfare policy, it seemed logical that community development, with its grassroots, bottom-up approach, would be the intervention of choice, empowering people through capacity building and community organizing (Gray, 1996c). Other sectors, like preventive primary healthcare, had used community development strategically to bring healthcare services to the poor, while adult education had used popular education approaches to empower people through adult literacy programs.

In theory, community development fit developmental social work's people-centered philosophy, human rights perspective, focus on prevention, and use of populist forms of intervention to create awareness through education, and to equalize the distribution of services and resources. Local people's participation in all stages of development from planning to evaluation, along with multisectoral and interdisciplinary cooperation, were essential to social work's new developmental perspective. In practice, then, developmental social work drew mainly on nonmaterial resources, such as local participation, self-help, community support, and naturally occurring networks. Social workers drew on and enhanced these strengths and assets in small-scale community initiatives organized around issues of concern.

To conclude this section, my experience in South Africa was colored by a great deal of optimism about the transformational shift to developmental welfare. At the time of the transition to a post-apartheid government, the South African welfare system was unique in Africa and, indeed, the world, as it was a product of 40 years of apartheid. As such, it was the most highly developed institutional welfare system in Africa but only for a minority of its racially diverse population. No other country in Africa had a comprehensive welfare system in the early 1990s in the aftermath of structural adjustment. Going against this trend, South Africa was, to the best of my knowledge, the only country in the world to attempt to implement social development policy as a statist, institutional, whole-of-government response to its unequalled racially unequal welfare system. However, like its reconstruction and development forerunner (RSA, 1994), its *White Paper for Social Welfare* (RSA, 1997) would never be implemented as intended, though, admittedly it would lead to a more inclusive distribution of welfare resources. As I noted in my assessment of the progress of social development in South Africa in 2006:

> It soon became clear that the new welfare system could not be driven solely by social ideals or social development theory. Economic realities forced policy makers to take the market into account in welfare provision ... and it became apparent that welfare was being market (economically) rather than development (socially) driven, especially once the RDP [Reconstruction and Development Programme] gave way to the more conventional Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy. (Gray, 2006, p. S57)

Rather than reshaping welfare, social development merely entrenched direct cash transfers through pensions and grants that had always constituted over 90% of the welfare budget. Reconceptualized as a social investment and poverty alleviation strategy, cash transfers became the main method for the redistribution of welfare resources (Gray, 2006; Lund, 2007, 2008), while underfunded services continued to deteriorate (Gray, 2006; Hölscher, 2008; Lombard, 2008; Patel, 2008; Patel & Hochfeld, 2013). Further, despite the growing discourse on developmental social work and the importance of community development, social workers remained trapped in statutory work in under-resourced government departments and nongovernment organizations (NGOs) rendering individualized casework interventions (Gray, 1996c; Gray & Lombard, 2008). The workforce changes it wrought left the social work profession in disarray (Gray & Lombard, 2022). When I left for Australia, I was already expressing my concerns about the transformation of the social service professions and its implications for social work (Gray, 2000).

My Switch in Thinking on Social Development: 2001–2010

The situation I encountered when I moved to Australia in 1999 was quite different to that I had experienced in South Africa. As a field of study, social development

had not gained much traction in Australia then, and it is no different even now (Gray & Crofts, 2003, 2008; Pawar, 2000). When I arrived in 1999, Australia was undergoing a period of massive welfare reform firmly embedding neoliberal privatization policy. This included the promotion of social enterprise as "a broad set of approaches that use[d] business acumen to address social goals ... including community economic development, profit generating activities undertaken by nonprofits to support service initiatives, cross-sectoral partnerships and private sector social responsibility programs" (Gray, Healy, & Crofts, 2003, pp. 141–142). This had spawned social entrepreneurs, less bound by regulation, whose diversity, innovation, and creativity enabled them to operate "outside the box" of government funding and to seize on opportunities to respond flexibly to changes in the external service environment (Crofts & Gray, 2001; Gray et al., 2003).

There is a clue here as to how my Australian experience began to reshape my views on social development as neoliberally aligned (Gray, 2010; Gray et al., 2003). As such, it was too conservative for Australian social work, with its theorists "highly critical of neoliberalism and capitalism and ... not eager to engage and harmonise with the tune of market economics – capital, investment, enterprise, growth, market, profit and stakeholder" (Gray & Crofts, 2008, p. 98). Given its failure to gain traction internally, the few Australian advocates of social development had aligned it to international social work (Cox & Pawar, 2006; Pawar & Cox, 2010).

These Australian influences, as well as the trajectory of South Africa's developmental welfare system, which I followed closely, informed a subsequent paper Social Development and the Status Quo that reflected my thoughts on its neoliberal cooptation 15 years on (Gray, 2010). Based on my South African experience, I had begun to see social development as a massive undertaking, which had spawned a multitude of organizational forms, yet, nevertheless, remained an ambiguous term and ill-defined area of work. While acknowledging that some social work practitioners had succeeded in making small-scale, local differences, in particular situations, for the most part, coopted by neoliberal politics, social development was fast becoming a tool of the status quo, rather than a transformative paradigm for confronting economic inequalities and social deprivation. Further, with the creation of professional and educational structures and the Inter-University Consortium for Social Development (later the International Consortium for Social Development (ICSD), a professional association targeting scholars worldwide to spread knowledge of social development), it had, like social work, become increasingly status quo oriented, despite arguments to the contrary (Pawar & Androff, 2021; Raymond & Cowger, 2011). As Mohan (2008) observed, social development was the offspring and bore the imprint of social work. Two respondents to Pawar and Androff's (2021) ICSD membership survey attested to this observation, noting the council's express purpose to "create a platform for engaging social workers globally and making international [development] central to social work pedagogy in [the] US and Europe" (p. 8) and to engage US social work faculty to increase "their global awareness and ... networking" (p. 8). Unlike the US

(and Australian) alignment of social development with international social work, my South African experience had led me to equate it with developmental or pro-poor social work. In the next section, I reflect on the social development discourse to show how I perceived its transformation from a statist-developmental to a neo-liberal-privatized welfare approach.

Reflecting on Shifting Concepts, Theories, Approaches, and Models

Like social work, theoretically, social development was a product of modernity, part of the modernization process as nations in the Global South moved from an agricultural to an industrial economy (Chambers, 1983). In the Global North, along with liberal capitalism, industrialization and modernization had brought with them the detraditionalization and secularization of society. Hence, as nations industrialized and modernized, they embedded liberal capitalism and democratic governance, and urbanized rapidly (Inglehart, 1997). The need for services and professionals arose as most northern countries developed highly bureaucratized planning, educational, welfare, legal, commercial, transport, housing, and health services. In the Global South, urban development became an extension of central-ized government planning delivered through highly bureaucratic systems seek-ing to extend modernization. Social development was top-down and met a great deal of resistance from the local people, who held fast to their traditional ways of life, and thus it was, for the most part, ineffective in solving the poverty problem. Population mobility and structurally induced inequality saw the rise of urban poverty with development no longer merely a rural activity. Social development emerged in these conditions as an alternative to consumption-based welfare built on cash transfers and individualistic professionalized services; it had a broader focus than social work.

Advocates of social development were especially critical of institutionalized services and extolled developmental community-based solutions as superior to remedial welfare. However, as social development became increasingly formalized, through professional organizations, educational programs, international confer-ences, and scholarly literature, it drew heavily on neoliberal theories that made it ripe for cooptation by welfare reform policies similarly resistant to conventional approaches that spawned passive welfare dependency. Its emerging discourse of productive economic engagement through human and social capital formation and micro-enterprise development reflected this neoliberal shift (Harriss, 2002; Midgley, 1999; Sherraden, Sanders, & Sherraden, 2004; Sherraden, Ssewamala, & Sanders, 2003). In the process, it forsook its institutional, statist ethos; criti-cal edge; and structural focus for strengths-and-empowerment approaches that lauded self-help, personal and community responsibility, and downsized public services. It differed markedly from the transformative "pedagogy of the oppressed" (Freire, 1972) that sought to bring power and self-determination to liberate com-munities withstanding the worst of capitalist-induced inequalities. Importantly, the under-theorization of social development had resulted in little attempt to

interrogate the critical discourses that constituted its "theoretical mix" from four related sources: welfare, social development, neoliberalism, and social work.

From *welfare* came the talk of social rights and social justice that it shared with professions like social work. From *social development* came its positioning as a whistle blower on the fallout from economic development associated with measuring the rise in people's standard of living and stance against economic development as the best solution to poverty, highlighting its selectivity and cost. However, as social development began its alignment with *neoliberalism*, its focus on structural inequality and statist interventions gave way to notions of active citizenship, productive participation, privatized services, and communitarianism (Harriss, 2002). From *social work* came the professional model, professional organizations, and university-based professional education. Social development juxtaposed itself against social work as its nearest role model, taking pains to demonstrate how it differed from remedial, individualistic interventions, instead advocating holistic, integrated practice models, when, in fact, it had sought to influence, and forge closer links with, social work (Billups, 1990, 1994; Elliott, 1993; Gray, 2006; Midgley, 1995). Social work had done likewise with its successive Global Agendas of Social Work and Social Development (IASSW, IFSW, & ICSW, 2010, 2020) built on what Mohan (2008) referred to as the delusion of development.

For me, social development's diverse theoretical and ideological roots had coalesced into a confusing discourse of rights, redistribution, and participation. Linked to rights and justice, it intimated a statist response that carried a mixed message in contemporary neoliberal environments of minimal state intervention and increased family and community responsibility. This had led to a decreased focus on structural "redistribution" and less talk of centralized economic planning to "nongovernment" (community) solutions in the social development discourse. High on the list was community-based social and micro-enterprise development supported by micro-finance rather than government funding. Its strong communitarian "participatory" ethos was also in danger of tainting by neoliberal devolution of responsibility onto families and communities as community development became synonymous with self-help. Rather than "participation as citizenship," wherein participants had a real voice, participatory approaches were overly voluntarist and failed to engage with structural causes and issues of power and politics (Hickey & Mohan, 2005). In the Global North, subjective well-being and quality of life related to individualized choices rather than citizenship participation, while individuals and communities became primarily responsible for social inclusion (Beresford, 2001; Carey, 2009; Stepney & Popple, 2008). This form of communitarianism was very different from the emancipatory community action needed for real local empowerment South Africa's developmental policy had portended. Thus, for me, social development had lost its transformative, critical edge and morphed into an extension of neoliberal governance that divested national governments of their welfare responsibilities and failed to transfer real power to the people. Instead, neoliberal welfare reform had reshaped statist notions of planned social development, brought a complete shift to the notion of responsibility, and

ensured a major restructuring of public welfare that bore strong similarities to the prior structural adjustment agenda.

Interrelated Aspects of Neoliberal Social Development

This neoliberal turn was visible in several interrelated aspects of social development that used the language of social investment, human and social capital formation, micro-enterprise and assets-based development, an anti-professional stance, and strengths-and-empowerment approaches, as discussed below.

The language of social investment

Though social development had sought to separate itself from economic development, the latter remained a priority in the Global South, where social deprivation was a major problem and where productive economic engagement and income generation were key to people's quality of life and social improvement. As Inglehart (1997) observed, social development operated in a value domain, where social and economic survival was paramount and collective approaches to poverty reduction and economic development were the most effective route out of poverty. From his earlier statist stance (Midgley, 1995), Midgley (1999) now advocated that neoliberalism offered *a new rationale for redistribution by advocating the allocation of collective resources* (p. 4 emphasis added) as *social investments that produced economic benefits* rather than expenditures that drained welfare coffers, hence social investment's productivist ethos. Rather than institutional responses, neoliberalism advocated downsized government services and an independent nongovernment or community sector, and favored strategies that returned "resources back to the economy" (Midgley, 1999, p. 4), such as self-sustaining micro-enterprises that drew on local resources and ploughed the benefits back into local communities. It favored entrepreneurial activities and self-help strategies that sought solutions from within communities, adopting the language of human and social capital not only as a resource for, but also as a product of, self-help and strengths-and-empowerment approaches. The economic language of human capital formation and mobilization, asset accumulation and investment, and employment and micro-enterprise creation (Schreiner & Woller, 2003; Sherraden et al., 2003, 2004) was very different from originally envisaged statist social development responses focused on the social aspects of development (Berner & Phillips, 2005; Coleman, 1988; Cox, 2007; Gray et al., 2003; Mowbray, 2004). Later Midgley (2017) perceived the same normative attributions in social investment that he had given to social development, saying it offered a viable alternative to conventional welfare that focused on "meeting consumption needs through cash transfers and social services" (p. 13). Yet, rather than the promised alternative, social development in South Africa had achieved exactly this. As he had claimed about social development, Midgley (2017) noted the lack of definitional clarity on social investment.

Human and social capital formation

Human capital formation involved preparing people for productive economic engagement through skills and capacity building and employment creation and supportive programs that invested in poor people to enhance their "economic integration" (Midgley, 1999, p. 9), a major neoliberal goal. For many, rather than productive economic participation through formal employment and real jobs, "economic integration" entailed self-employment through social cooperatives and micro-enterprises. Social capital formation involved the strengthening of local networks that supported local enterprise and institution building as a basis for economic growth. It drew on populist participatory development approaches that placed local realities, knowledge, and capabilities at the heart of development interventions (Chambers, 1983). Despite its language of empowerment, its focus on the local ignored wider structures of injustice and oppression, while its treatment of participation "as a technical method ... rather than a political methodology of empowerment" (Hickey & Mohan, 2005, p. 242) weakened its transformative potential.

Micro-enterprise development

Sherraden (1991) described *micro-enterprise development* as "self-employment by the poor" bolstered by *microcredit*, that is, small loans to help the poor engage in productive economic activities through small businesses, and *microfinance*, that is, microcredit and other financial products, including savings, remittances, and insurances designed for use by the poor. Both strategies recognized the poor as economic actors. The logic behind this thinking was that micro-enterprise development would provide people with tangible social investments that would, in turn, enhance their capabilities for, and facilitate their participation in, the productive economy through the production of goods and services as marketable commodities.

Assets-based development

The micro-enterprise model fit the paradigm of assets-based development, developed by international organizations like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and United Nations. Heavily promoted in the USA by academics in the University of Washington's Center for Social Development, the model conceptualized assets as infrastructural or financial resources for consumption or investment (Beverly & Sherraden, 1997; Sherraden, 1991). The provision of infrastructural or financial resources, such as saving strategies, financial literacy, financial support, and access to financial institutions and low-cost financial products, would encourage and support the poor in developing sustainable livelihoods through income generation and the accumulation of savings for their long-term security. Sherraden (1991) argued that the poor needed these infrastructural or financial resources to build and conserve assets; this was somewhat different from, and not to be confused with, the assets-based community development approach that

built upon nonmaterial community assets (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). While economist Sen (1999) had successfully shifted the development focus to human capabilities defined as the amount of agency individuals might exercise, for the most part, enhanced choice derived from the accumulation of assets. Recognizing this, assets building focused attention on "the poor as strategic managers of their limited asset base" (Mahoney, 2006, p. 1).

Anti-professional stance

In community development, the practitioner is no longer the expert, and client self-determination and participation is highly valued. This fits perfectly with neoliberal consumer choice and service-user participation policy used increasingly to undermine the need for costly professional intervention. These policies led to the increasing deprofessionalization and deskilling of the social services workforce with detrimental consequences for professionally trained social workers. This anti-professional stance, however, was out of kilter with the drive toward the pro-fessionalization and formalization of social development through its international organizational structure and conferences and professional university-based edu-cation programs (Gray & Rennie, 2007; Meinert, 1991).

Strengths-and-empowerment approaches

Rather than an exclusive focus on problems and deficits, strengths-and-empowerment approaches highlighted and drew upon the nonmaterial assets and strengths of people and communities. They fit well with the neoliberal capabilities focus on individual agency and choice that shifted responsibility from government to poor and marginalized citizens, the focus of (developmental) social work. In so doing, they glossed over the structural inequalities, barriers, and obstructions to accessing services that the bulk of the poor experienced, and placed the weight of self-betterment firmly on individuals and communities, collectively labeled social capital. There was thus a strong connection between neoliberal welfare ideology and the individualistic and communitarian self-help agenda extolled by strengths-and-empowerment approaches (Gray, 2011).

Tracing the Changes through Three Influential Models

There was a discernible shift over time from a focus on economic development to the centralized planned model of social development used in the South African experiment. However, with the influence of neoliberal welfare reform, this gave way to a social enterprise model built on minimal government investment, as the Australian example showed. Likewise, the critical development model identified a shift away from comprehensive development and universal public services to a targeted focus on poverty alleviation visible in international development policy. The following discussion summarizes this trajectory in the development discourse.

Centralized planned model of social development

The centralized planned model saw social development as an alternative to consumption-based welfare. As a statist intervention model, it sought to harmonize social policies and programs with measures designed to promote economic development. The model of integrated planning that this early view of social development entailed tied it to government and government-linked human service agencies within education, public works, housing, welfare, health, transport, and so on, which were characteristic of modernized societies. Furthermore, integrated planning required highly efficient institutional structures and the horizontal integration of programs delivered by separate ministries and government departments, as well as vertical integration between levels of government and grassroots communities. As demonstrated in South Africa, this level of integrated planning was extremely difficult to achieve, and the absorption of developmental social workers into the state apparatus made them agents of the state rather than change agents advocating for human rights and social justice (Gray, 2006; Gray & Lombard, 2008).

Social enterprise model

As a desirable alternative to the welfare charity model, the social enterprise model promoted individual and cooperative entrepreneurship, self-help, and asset accumulation with minimal government investment. In Australia, the Centre for Civil Society defined a social enterprise as a *business with a social cause* that was not in any way reliant on government funding. It was an independent third sector organization. The third sector differed from the voluntary or nongovernment sector comprising internationally funded, government-supported NGOs. The third sector sought independence from government and freedom from the bureaucratic red tape so that social enterprises could be innovative and flexible, and directly responsive to the needs of their communities of interest. Some had developed a value system built around fair trading principles. Neoliberal social development sought to hitch its wagon to this sector (Burkett, 2001).

Critical development model

Burkett (2001) noted that "working developmentally" meant working via nonstate organizations with local communities in countries struggling with the impact of economic globalization. It required a critical model that grasped the global–local nexus and the way in which neoliberal global capitalism appropriated resources in the Global South to serve its ends. Burkett and McDonald (2005) noted that a critical development model used broad economic and political frames of reference that linked national policies into a wider international or global system, that is, local communities and NGOs subject to global bodies, such as the World Bank, the United Nations, and the World Trade Organization, through

development aid and donor arrangements. Cook and Dugarova (2014) observed social policy's push to incorporate structural "issues of gender justice, rising inequalities, precarious employment and unsustainable development" (p. 33). While social policy might have reframed development and poverty reduction as key strategies of structural transformation and economic development through "building links to the productive sectors and promoting transformations towards higher-value production and decent employment" (Cook & Dugarova, 2014, p. 33), this was largely due to the influence of international development organizations. Consequently, while countries in the Global South might have impressive social policies, they also have poor policy implementation records. Thus, the informal economy thrives, absorbing the bulk of the poor struggling to eke out a living on urban streets, while "decent jobs" are hard to come by. In short, with the influence of neoliberalism, comprehensive development and universal public services fell by the wayside and in their stead came highly targeted social protection programs for those at greatest risk, with minimalistic social protection measures as the main means of poverty alleviation (Gray, 2017).

Critiques of Neoliberal Social Development

Because social development was a largely undeveloped, untested theory, it too easily adopted the language of neoliberalism and its communitarian discourse without recognition of its largely economic focus. These uncritical theoretical shifts weakened its influence and pointed to the need for a more critical model that embraced the multidimensional aspects of social development.

Underdeveloped theory

In the mid-1990s, Midgley (1995) became a strong advocate of social development, while simultaneously acknowledging that it was an underdeveloped theory. At that time, he described it as an institutional, developmental *approach to welfare* that shared the goals of welfare statism and *held national governments primarily responsible for individual welfare and social development*, while simultaneously offering an *alternative to conventional consumption-based welfare*. Midgley (1997) referred to it as a grand "pie-in-the-sky" theory, acknowledging that "efforts to implement social development strategies are faced with formidable difficulties," yet simultaneously presented it as a "comprehensive, pragmatic, and workable approach to social welfare" (p. 202). In 2001, he described it as abstract, ideational, and hortatory—meaning that it had a lot to say about what ought to be done and how, in theory, things might pan out, but it had a shaky track record and little empirical grounding (Midgley, 2001). The field continued, despite widespread critiques of social development as "utopian, wide-ranging, and theoretically underdeveloped" (Beverly & Sherraden, 1997, p. 1). Given the wide range of disciplines involved and their diverse perspectives, social development was an enormously complex, elusive, and unworkable concept that promised more than

it could deliver (Meinert & Kohn, 1987). Few scholars have sought to interrogate its close links to neoliberalism and its subsequent ideological cleavages (Gray, 2010).

Uncritical adoption of the language of neoliberalism

The language of "productive engagement" in contemporary social development discourse might easily be confused with the neoliberal notion of "active citizenship." Both construed welfare as a form of investment and eschewed passive welfare dependency. Social development theorists' failure to engage critically with contemporary service environments led to investment-oriented interventions that fit well with the neoliberal notion of positive, productive, or active citizenship, where "independent (economically active) contributors" were held as an example against passive, welfare-dependent recipients marginalized and oppressed by the dominant system. Social development discouraged long-term engagement with remedial social services and encouraged productivist social investment that recognized human capabilities, self-determination, and meaningful participation. As Berner and Phillips (2005) observed, "in recognizing the capabilities of poor people to act as 'agents' in their own empowerment, we should not fall into the neo-liberal trap of seeing all assistance to that process as both undeserved and demeaning" (pp. 334–335). The community development orientation was costly, and resource and time intensive, and it was extremely difficult to get people to "participate meaningfully" in development programs that, in any way, required significant external investment or start-up capital, especially since often "the people" were poor and marginalized populations. Further, this empowerment approach did little to lift people out of poverty or move them up a rung of the social ladder.

Uncritical acceptance of the discourse of "community"

Social development's uncritical acceptance of the discourse of "community" disregarded critiques of its use to mask poor government resourcing of social programs (Bryson & Mowbray, 1981, 2005). Rose (1999) noted how the peculiar morality of advanced liberalism constructed a seductive community that bound people to particular identities and commitments seemingly beyond the sphere of the state, in which they were ostensibly free to make choices. It had spawned a welfare reform discourse that was heavily patriarchal and moralistic, with strong condemnation of fatherless families and single parents, and policies on strengthening families that often resulted in cuts to benefits for those who did not conform to stringent eligibility requirements. As Cleaver (1999) observed:

> Development practitioners excel in perpetuating the myth that communities are capable of anything, that all [that] is required is sufficient mobilisation and the latent and unlimited capacities of the community will be unleashed in the interests of development ... [when] there is significant evidence of

very real structural and resource constraints ... impacting [most severely] on those who may need development the most. (p. 604)

Social development theory presented "community" as an entrepreneurial space of investment in human and social capital, where poor people drew on, or invested, their own capabilities and creative resources. Entangled with neoliberal welfare reform, its social investment approaches of social enterprise and social entrepreneurship ignored structural divisions of class, race, gender, and ethnicity preventing resource access (Gray et al., 2003). As Stepney and Popple (2008) observed, "the generalised wish to achieve a new social consensus in the community based on justice and mutual responsibility makes no mention of the need for wider economic reform or any changes to the social structure" (p. 92) to address social inequalities. Communitarianism was ambivalent about the need for economic reform and redistribution, opting instead to gloss over structural inequalities for an optimistic notion of the power of communities to heal themselves. Via its social investment and community self-help approaches, welfare reform introduced market mechanisms whereby "the more communities put in, the more they would get out." There was no "recognition that the poor cannot be self-sufficient in escaping poverty, that communities are systems of conflict as well as cooperation, and that the social, political and economic macro-structure cannot be sidestepped" (Berner & Phillips, 2005, p. 334). While the self-help and capability approaches reminded experts of the importance of community participation, unless they included strategies of economic redistribution bottom-up, community development was likely to prove just as futile as top-down community development. To balance the one-sided approach of social capital formation, self-help, and community participation, access to external economic resources and assets-building initiatives, such as micro-credit and start-up capital, were pivotal.

Toward a Critical Model of Developmental Practice: 2011 to Present

My subsequent scholarship on indigenous, environmental, and decolonizing social work intensified my concerns about social development already outlined (Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2013; Gray, Coates, & Yellow Bird, 2008; Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird, & Hetherington, 2013). I was equally critical of the subsequent poverty alleviation and sustainable development discourses and their focus on human development (Gray, 2020; Gray et al., 2017). This work led to the development of a critical model of developmental practice to address the weaknesses identified above (Gray & Lombard, 2023). This model has four core *foci* and approaches reflecting the structural–political, cultural–contextual, critical–developmental, and environmental–spiritual dimensions of social development.

Structural–Political

The structural–political dimension focuses on the structural causes rather than the individualization of social problems and makes analyses of power central by

recognizing the dominance of certain groups over others and the flows of disadvantage and oppression from gender, cultural, ethnic, and race-based inequalities. It suggests strategies to address power imbalances through the elimination of discrimination, political representation of marginalized groups, and removal of unjust policies and practices. Such strategies take human rights and social justice seriously and suggest empowering, transformative, political, and anti-oppressive interventions that increase political recognition and representation, social equality, and economic well-being. They involve critical policy analysis and representation in development planning and policy execution processes. Recognizing the impossibility of achieving transformation merely through nonmaterialist strategies to build human and social capital, their effectiveness depends on government funding to bolster community-driven, income-generating, livelihood-sustaining strategies.

Cultural–Contextual

The cultural–contextual dimension attests the importance of context and culture and suggests culturally appropriate interventions responsive to local cultures, values, and cultural practices. Such interventions strengthen insider perspectives and acknowledge the resilience of culture. Through their critical praxis, they involve *inter alia* dialogue around unjust cultural practices that discriminate against certain groups, especially women. They involve making knowledge comprehensible to local community groups and embracing indigenous approaches and interpretations, accommodating local worldviews, and responding to day-to-day social issues.

Critical–Developmental

The critical–developmental dimension focuses on poverty alleviation through *inter alia* reducing inequities in service provision and enhancing people's access to government resources and support. It recognizes that the increased reliance on nonmaterial resources, like participation, self-help, mutual support, cooperation, and human capital formation (capacity building), of people-centered community development will not lift people out of poverty and that only strong institutional support for income-generating and livelihood-sustaining initiatives can foster economic inclusion. It is critical of contemporary strategies to build and strengthen community self-reliance that implicitly hold the poor responsible for their predicament rather than focus on the structural causes of poverty. Recognizing the importance of direct experience and local knowledge about pressing community issues, it is critical of top-down interventions that overlook grassroots needs and interests, and calls for grassroots participation in political decision-making structures, where people can make a difference. It recognizes that NGOs have the potential to represent and advocate for the interests of marginalized groups that lack a say in community decision-making and calls for large-scale, income-generating,

livelihood-sustaining strategies that contribute to real change and sustainable development.

Environmental–Spiritual

To some extent, the millennium and sustainable development goals displaced social development as a poverty-alleviation strategy, while economic imperatives overrode social and environmental concerns. Gray et al. (2017) argued that the relationship between issues of economic growth and environmental sustainability had not been resolved and the dismal progress toward this resolution was attributable to the intransigent focus on *development* in "sustainable development":

> Industrial progress, increased productivity, unrestricted trade, economic growth, market integration, overconsumption, and scientific and technological advancement remained embedded in development policies promoted by international financial institutions and foreign aid and development organisations, despite their devastating environmental consequences. (Gray et al., 2017, p. 143)

For Bullard (2011), development had lost its moral and practical content, given its "routine failure ... to feed, house, clothe, educate and care for the invisible majority" (p. 141). This was evident in the prioritization of growth and production over social and ecological justice and the lack of political will to make decisions that would serve to lessen uninterrupted environmental degradation (Sneddon, Howarth, & Norgaard, 2006). Balancing economic, social, and environmental concerns remained an intractable problem, with the anthropocentric focus of social and sustainable development overshadowing ecocentric concerns relating to environmental degradation and resource depletion. Thus, the environmental–spiritual dimension highlights ecocentric concerns and the interrelationship between humans and their physical environment. In its focus on environmental justice and sustainability, it assumes that religion, spirituality, and people's relationship with the land are an important part of their life-world. As Cox-Shrader (2011) observed, "the transition to sustainability is a transition to a worldview grounded in ecological justice, in which humans are part of our ecosystems" (p. 270). Living in harmony with the environment as a condition of survival has long been a central tenet of indigenous cosmologies, where "sustainability is circular, complex; it is about harmony, relationships and rhythms. It is not an accounting exercise for rationing ... [Earth's] resources" (Bullard, 2011, p. 142).

Conclusion

Though this critical developmental model offers a more comprehensive focus to extend the theory and practice of social development, the foregoing discussion reflects my skepticism about its potential to alleviate contemporary social

problems, not least poverty. Human ingenuity has always trumped statist and foreign intervention shown by diasporic remittances now surpassing overseas development aid and national social protection measures as poverty-alleviation strategies. This shows a dramatic shift in the development landscape with diasporic organizations firmly positioned to influence international and national interventionist policies. Decades of colonial and postwar development intervention have done little to reduce poverty and inequality in the Global South. Nearly 80 years of postwar colonial and independent state intervention, with international financial institutions and NGOs heavily influencing national development policy, leaves me with more questions than answers regarding the relationship between development, foreign aid, and poverty alleviation. Gray and Ariong (2017) argued that the tripartite relationship between these three domains hinged on the way in which each was conceptualized and defined, and shifts in understanding of exactly what each sought to accomplish. What was the purpose of development, for example? Was it modernization, economic growth, poverty reduction, or an enhancement of people's quality of life, for example? Historically, development policy has focused primarily on economic growth with *foci* shifting from modernization, industrialization, and urbanization to human development and poverty reduction with the millennium and sustainable development goals. We might ask the same question of foreign aid. Is its primary objective the embedding of modern Western systems of economic management and political governance, or the reduction of poverty to increase people's quality of life? The argument has been that economic growth was the best way of achieving these outcomes, but history has proved that instead it has brought gross inequality with millions of people still mired in poverty worldwide. Predominant ideas on the best way to reduce poverty have hinged on ideas about the purpose of development and foreign aid, which, for the most part, hinged on countries in the Global South having the seemingly unattainable goals of strong systems of governance, sturdy social infrastructures, and sound economic management. The theory of social development needs to grapple with these broader questions to be effective in contemporary environments. To return to the beginning, it has not replaced consumption-driven welfare in South Africa and, if anything, for all the rhetoric of cash transfers being social investment and poverty-alleviating strategies, passive-welfare dependency has increased dramatically. Perhaps, it is best to think of welfare and development as parallel streams working to promote human betterment and social improvement, recognizing that one cannot replace the other.

A critical developmental perspective questions individualistic theories and the idea that poor people can lift themselves out of poverty merely through strengths- and assets-based capacity building. It focuses attention on structural disadvantage, highlighting issues relating to class, race, ethnic, and gender inequality. Its overtly political focus raises awareness of structural inequalities and agitates for policies to equalize the distribution of resources, and reduce inequities in service provision. Finally, it calls on national governments to fund community economic-development and income-generating initiatives to lift people out of poverty.

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