

## **SOCIOECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTAL SOCIAL WORK**

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### **Summary**

Development is defined here as a planned and comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, in a defined geographic area, that is rights-based and ecologically oriented and aims to continually improve the well-being of the entire population and all of its individuals. Socioeconomic developmental social work refers to professional intervention with the intent of improving socioeconomic conditions on seven levels: individual and group empowerment; conflict resolution; institution-building; community-building; nation-building; region-building and world-building. Socioeconomic development should lead us to (1) an explicit commitment to important human values; (2) the recognition that the levels of intervention are so intertwined that social and economic interventions need to involve all levels to some extent; and (3) the creation or development of continually responsive and sustainable organizations and social institutions that address human priorities.

### **1. Introduction**

*Development* has been defined in different ways and one would not expect a developer, the CEO of a multinational corporation, a neighborhood resident, the head of a community-based organization (CBO) and a policymaker to necessarily agree on one definition or for all of them to think development is something positive. Development is defined here as a planned and comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, in a defined geographic area, that is rights-based and ecologically oriented and aims to continually improve the well-being of the entire population and all of its individuals. The individuals would be actively involved in open, meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits. This comprehensive definition has three components - social development, economic development and

environmental protection.

This comprehensive definition of development is not the one most commonly used after World War II and well into the 1960s. The early definitions and development theory focused only on economic development, national income growth that usually was measured by a change in per capita Gross National Product. This narrowly defined approach was the one generally adopted in Asia and so the ideas such as full employment, universal social services and a social safety net were not part of the development initiatives. These benefits were expected to develop, if needed, following economic development.

*Socioeconomic development*, like the definition of development adopted here, emphasizes progress in terms of economic and social factors within a geographic unit. Economic development is the process of raising the level of prosperity through increased production, distribution and consumption of goods and services. Social development, on the other hand, refers to the complexity of social dynamics (the interplay of social structures, processes and relationships) and focuses on (1) the social concerns of the people as objectives of development and (2) people-centered, participatory approaches to development. Social development is about inclusiveness, social justice and the common good. Indicators of social development provide comparative information about areas such as income, poverty, employment, employment security, education, health, crime and civic participation. Sometimes social development indicator lists also have included information about the environment. Richard Estes, a co-developer of Hong Kong's social report in 2000, noted that the report included a subindex on environmental quality with ratings of solid waste recycling, beaches, public open space and fresh water consumption.

The purpose of economic development is to improve the social and material well-being of all individuals and social institutions with the goal of achieving the highest possible level of human development. Socioeconomic development, therefore, requires the integration of economic and social development. Progress in the quality of social and economic life should only be seen as progress if it is rights based and minimally affects, conserves or improves the natural environment.

*Social work* is a separate profession in the United States, but a broader definition of the term is used here than is used by American social workers. Social work, as defined here, refers to interventions by representatives of many disciplines and backgrounds and this can include, for instance, social workers, clinical sociologists, practicing economists, community organizers and policymakers. Socioeconomic developmental social work refers to professional intervention with the intent of improving socioeconomic conditions in a geographic area for the general population including all individuals and strata. This intervention can be at a number of levels from the individual to the global.

## **2. Notes on the history of socioeconomic development**

According to James Midgley, the linkage of social interventions with economic activities is not new. In the late 1800s, for instance, the volunteer workers of the

Charity Organization Society in England helped impoverished clients find employment or start small businesses. There also are examples of directing the economy to improve the living standards of the population. For instance, United States President Franklin Roosevelt's massive recovery program (the New Deal of the 1930s) adopted John Maynard Keynes' idea to intervene to promote economic growth and employment.

In West Africa, in the late 1920s and the 1930s, British colonial authorities began to change their policies and promoted economic development. By the 1940s, economic development was supported by efforts in education and the social services. These approaches, particularly in the rural areas, involved literacy programs as well as practical skills. Mass literacy began to be promoted but the term was seen as too narrow (connecting only with education) and was replaced with what was thought to be a more appropriate term, community development. By 1954, the British authorities adopted the term *social development* to describe their efforts. The new term linked social welfare and community development to the economic development efforts in the colonies.

The United Nations (UN), in the 1950s, promoted approaches to social welfare that emphasized child and family welfare services. By the beginning of the 1960s, the emphasis was on economic growth in addition to concerns about families and children and the UN used the British label of "social development" for this combined interest. Leading economists endorsed the idea of unified socioeconomic development planning and recommended that central planning agencies be put in place.

Early postcolonial development efforts had a centralized, top-down approach and did not involve the local community. That also was true for efforts after that time and there was criticism of this model. In response to the challenge, the UN included local participation in its social development model. The World Bank also began supporting human capital projects that incorporated economic development and the Bank became interested in local participation. Questions, however, were raised about the minimal local participation in World Bank projects and whether this kind of local participation could determine or even influence the kind and direction of a project.

The idea of the close connection of social and economic development was diminished in the 1980s in the United States and some nations in Western Europe. A neoconservative paradigm focusing on the marketplace became increasingly prominent and challenged the role of government in economic and social arenas. Some of the gains made during the previous decades were lost.

Development strategies in the Global South also were being implemented in a narrow way focusing on economic growth for the benefit of national elites and transnational corporations. In Asia there was a strong belief that social development would inevitably follow economic development. Reports from certain international organizations, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), reinforced this belief and, in part, reflected "rosy" reports of progress being submitted by countries to these national agencies. The involvement of the transnational corporations was facilitated by the World Bank and the IMF and, as Arline Prigoff has noted, "it would be difficult to overestimate the central role of those financial institutions in the negative outcomes of

international economic development projects undertaken by nations in Africa, Latin America, and Asia during the latter part of the twentieth century.” It is not surprising then that economic growth sometimes was associated with rising unemployment and poverty for certain sectors of a country and marginalization of local producers. The reported economic growth also usually did not take into account environmental costs and impacts.

In response to the negative impacts of economic globalization, groups have formed to help stimulate new thinking, foster joint activity and provide public education. One of these groups, representing over 60 organizations in 25 countries, is the International Forum on Globalization (IFG). Those associated with IFG have gone on record opposing IMF policies in Zimbabwe, for instance, where, the IMF is said to have taken a “devastated economy” with difficult social conditions and made the situation much worse. The IMF also has noted that indigeous people are on the “frontlines” of globalization. These frontline groups may not survive without enlightened socioeconomic developmental social work.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Jan Marie Fritz, Ph.D., C.C.S.**, is a professor of planning and health policy in the School of Planning at the University of Cincinnati (USA). She also is affiliated with the university's program in Women's Studies and the Department of Sociology. Professor Fritz, a Certified Clinical Sociologist, is the author of more than 80 publications in English, French, Italian and Spanish. Her most recent work is an article on mediation theory (in French), a chapter on the history of clinical sociology (in English) and a co-edited volume on mediation in 8 countries (in Italian). Dr. Fritz is a past president of the Sociological Practice Association and chair of the sociological practice section of the American Sociological Association. She is vice president of the sociotechnics-sociological practice division of the International Sociological Association (ISA) and a past president of the clinical sociology division of the ISA. Professor Fritz was a member of the executive board of the ISA for 8 years and the ISA's representative to the United Nations for 4 years. She currently is a member of the U.S. Environment Protection Agency's National Environmental Justice Advisory Council. She is a mediator for the U.S. Postal Service, a regional office of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and special education cases for the Ohio Department of Education.