Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk
An international journal rooted in South Africa
IJenali kazwelonke engcambu zayo ziseMzantsi Afrika
Vol. 62, No. 2, 2026, DOI: https://doi.org/10.15270/62-2-1838

BOOK REVIEW

Danyschka Jacobs

Stellenbosch University, Department of Social Work, Stellenbosch, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7405-8246 danyschka@sun.ac.za

Midgley, J. (2026). *Social protection and development: Growth, welfare and equity*. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited. ISBN: 978 1 03530 8187. Pages: 212. https://www.e-elgar.com/shop/gbp/social-protection-and-development-9781035308187.html?srsltid=AfmBOoqf6ksAIUIg9G6wuHgl0oK5Dk4jXmZGg4N0TIoOcc4IyFyUncSU

James Midgely is a leading international scholar in social work and remains one of the most influential writers in the field of social development, welfare policy, social welfare and developmental social work. His work has shaped the manner in which practitioners, policy makers and researchers conceptualise and practise social work within a social development paradigm. His writing has deeply influenced the understanding and relationship between social welfare, social development, poverty alleviation and economic growth from grassroots practice to policy formulation and implementation. Midgley's scholarly contributions, particularly in the Global South, and especially in South Africa's post-apartheid welfare transformation, have provided critically important theoretical and policy foundations for the advancement of developmental approaches to social welfare.

Social work students, practitioners, policy formulators and researchers, particularly those within the South African context during the era of democratic transition and the concomitant transformation of welfare systems and policies informed by social development principles, will be closely familiar with James Midgley's seminal 1995 publication, *Social Development: The Developmental Perspective in Social Welfare*. His conceptualisation of social development as "a process of planned social change designed to promote the wellbeing of the population as a whole in conjunction with a dynamic process of economic development" (p. 25) has been extensively integrated into, and has served as a foundational point of departure for, major social welfare policy formulations, postgraduate theses and dissertations, and pedagogical discourse

relating to social development. Against this backdrop, the significance of his latest contribution to the social work community, not only within Southern Africa but across the discipline internationally, can hardly be overstated. Indeed, it may reasonably be argued that James Midgley's scholarly contributions and theoretical formulations on social development occupy a seminal and foundational position in the global evolution of contemporary social work scholarship and practice.

In *Social Protection and Development: Growth, Welfare and Equity*, Midgley continues this focus on a developmental trajectory by foregrounding a compelling case for the integration of social protection and social development. The book challenges neoliberal assertions that social protection in terms of welfare systems and social grants stifle economic development and promote dependency. Conversely, Midgley argues that social protection functions as a developmental and transformative intervention capable of promoting economic participation through increasing consumption, promoting social investment, reducing poverty and improving societal wellbeing. The book therefore offers an important contribution not only to developmental social policy discourse, but also to social work education, particularly within Global South contexts marked by poverty, inequality and growing socio-economic instability. Beyond its policy and economic contributions, the book also offers a vision for development that repositions social protection as part of a collective endeavour towards achieving social progress and human wellbeing within an increasingly fragmented global context.

A central tenet of the book is Midgley's continued refinement of welfare developmentalism through the integration of social protection and social development. Throughout the book, Midgley develops the argument that social protection is not only about redistributive welfare, but should rather be viewed as a fundamental component of development that advances and promotes economic participation, advances poverty reduction and strengthens societal wellbeing. The book reflects strong influences from welfare developmentalism, Sen's capability approach and Keynesian theory, drawing from development theory, welfare policy, economics and international welfare literature to challenge neoliberal assumptions that welfare systems hinder economic growth and promote dependency.

Midgley's argument carries particular relevance in contemporary global contexts, especially across the Global South where inequality, austerity measures and policies, high unemployment and socio-economic instability persist. The book consistently argues that social welfare and economic development should not be conflicting priorities, but rather mutually interconnected and reinforcing. Midgley demonstrates this interconnection through his analysis of the link between social protection and economic stability. He argues that social protection does not merely address social ills and needs, but is an important factor in contributing to economic resilience in times of uncertainty and crisis through sustaining household consumption and supporting labour market participation. Thus, social protection reaches further than being a simple welfare mechanism, but is a critical component for stable and sustainable development. In doing so, Midgley proposes a developmental framework where social protection collectively fosters economic growth, welfare and equity. This developmental framework emerges as one of the book's most valuable scholarly contributions, especially for social work students and practitioners concerned with structural poverty, developmental social welfare, social justice

and inequality. Moreover, this perspective is especially important in South Africa where traditional understandings and implementation of developmental welfare continues to be challenged because of continuing inequality, unemployment and poverty, much of which remains rooted in the enduring socio-economic legacy of apartheid.

One of the themes closely linked to Midgley's social protection and developmental argument is his discussion of structural poverty and inequality. Throughout the book, poverty is understood as not just the consequence of individual failings and dependency on government structures, but rather as the result of broader economic, social and developmental processes that influence the availability of opportunities, participation and wellbeing for citizens. Touching on Sen's capability approach, Midgley expands further on the understanding of poverty, not limiting its definition to income-based material deprivation, but rather taking into account the full extent to which individuals and communities can participate in social and economic life. Therefore, poverty is understood as a constraint on human capability, consumption, opportunity and wellbeing.

Both Sen and Midgley challenge neoliberal discourse that portrays welfare recipients as passive beneficiaries whose reliance on social protection and welfare systems is assumed to slow economic growth. Instead, Midgley argues that the foundation of genuine development lies in investing in people. He demonstrates throughout the book that social protection can sustain individual and household consumption, provide the stability necessary for individuals to seek employment, and participate more meaningfully in both formal and informal economic activity. According to Midgley, social protection also acts as a form of social investment, with investments in education, skills development, health, wellbeing and human capability being vital for long-term developmental success. Through the integration of social protection and social development, exclusion can be reduced and broader social and economic outcomes can be achieved by expanding people’s capacities to participate productively in both society and the economy. This book provides an incisive analysis of poverty and inequality that resonates strongly with social work's foundational commitment to social justice and social change.

The integration of social protection and social development becomes an important contribution to social work curriculum development. It encourages students to engage critically with, and deepen their understanding of, the relationship between welfare policy, economic and social development, and social welfare. Moreover, this book reframes and challenges conventional understandings of poverty, encouraging students to expand their perspectives on structural and developmental dimensions of social work practice.

Midgley’s final contribution does not merely defend social protection as economically productive. It also reasserts the possibility of collective social progress and developmental hope within a contemporary context increasingly shaped by neoliberal austerity, inequality, authoritarianism and social divide. In addition to the book’s theoretical and policy contributions, some of its most enduring insights lie in reintroducing developmental imagination into contemporary social work discourse. Midgley should not merely be understood as a scholar of social development, but rather recognised as a prolific thinker whose scholarly trajectory has been profoundly informed by both South Africa's developmental realities and wider international debates around welfare, inequality, development and social

justice. Throughout his career, Midgley has long held the position that social welfare should serve as a catalyst for development rather than a purely reactive response to social needs.

His reflections on development and social progress amply illustrate this outlook. Midgley comes from a generation that was influenced by war, political unrest and significant social transformation, yet retained a belief in the possibility of social intervention and developmental policy to collectively advance wellbeing. In stark contrast, many social work students and practitioners, particularly within the Global South, are entering the profession in a landscape marked by growing inequality, severe resource and financial constraints, high unemployment, political uncertainty and intensifying demands on welfare systems. For some, especially first-generation students in South Africa, these realities can engender disillusionment and cynicism about both the future trajectory of the profession and the prospect of meaningful social change.

By reconceptualising social protection as developmental rather than simply remedial, Midgley compels students and practitioners to think expansively about the future and to view welfare policy as a catalyst for advancing human potential, capability, participation and wellbeing in ways that mutually reinforce growth, welfare and equity. Ultimately, this book not only enriches developmental social work education, but also serves as a powerful reminder that social work remains deeply and fundamentally committed to the possibility of social transformation and collective human dignity and flourishing. Thus, given its conceptual depth, policy relevance and developmental focus, the book stands as an invaluable resource for social work education and should be included on reading lists for students, academics and practitioners across the profession.

REFERENCES

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