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SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION

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Reflections on social development: Past, present and future

ABSTRACT

This article contributes to a collection of especially commissioned papers to mark the 60th anniversary of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*. Reflecting the author's personal views on the past, present and likely future trajectory of social development, he contends that there has been significant progress, but also severe setbacks that have fostered the currently pessimistic views of the field. Nevertheless, he contends that stubborn optimism is needed and that a commitment to change can mobilise support and result in renewal and significant social improvements. The recent 2025 World Summit on Social Development in Doha suggests that much is possible.

REFLECTIONS

I am grateful to Professor Engelbrecht for inviting me to share my personal reflections on the past history of social development, the challenges it faces today and its prospects for the future. Since social development emerged as a distinctive approach for promoting human welfare in the mid-20th century, much has been achieved. It has inspired a range of interventions by governments, international organisations, nonprofits and community groups that have made a major contribution to improving social conditions around the world. The field has also developed a sound academic base, which has fostered a deeper understanding of its key features, theoretical dimensions and goals.

As *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* celebrates its 60th anniversary, I am honoured to have this opportunity to share my thoughts about social development. Over the last 60 years the journal has played a critical role in promoting social work education and practice not only in South Africa but in other countries as well. Many congratulations to Professor Engelbrecht and his colleagues on this important achievement. On a personal note, the 60th jubilee is especially poignant for me, because I published my very first academic article in *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* when I was a doctoral student at the University of Cape Town way back in the late 1960s. I am grateful to the journal, its founders and editors for the launching of my academic career.

I am also mindful of my experience of growing up in South Africa, studying at the University of Cape Town and practising as a social worker before I pursued postgraduate studies both at UCT and the London School of Economics. It was this experience and my subsequent academic work under the guidance of Professor Richard Titmus at the LSE that not only prepared me for my subsequent interest in social development, but inspired my work. There is also a personal link with this issue of the journal which is publishing articles by emerging African scholars. It is a pleasure to join them as they reflect on the theme *Harambee for Sustainable Shared Futures.* I wish them well in their future careers.

It has been a privilege to contribute to the academic literature on social development over the years. This literature has defined social development, documented its history, provided a conceptual basis for policy, examined its different interventions and evaluated its impact. The result is a complex mix of scholarly endeavours that have informed social development policies and programmes in many countries. However, there are differences of opinion about what social development involves. Although most scholars accept that social development uniquely links welfare and economic development, others emphasise the provision of services, while yet others, such as myself, stress the importance of economic growth and participation in achieving welfare goals. Be that as it may, many interventions in terms of social development policy and practice have been identified in the literature. These include local community development projects, national planning, health and nutritional programmes, literacy and adult education, maternal and child health initiatives, and social protection. It is also recognised that these operate on multiple levels and especially at the community and national levels.

These interventions and their impact were critically examined at the recent World Summit on Social Development held in Doha in 2025. Although its participants had no doubt that a great deal has been accomplished, they recognised that the record is uneven and that there have been many challenges and setbacks that have affected the overarching progressive trajectory of social development. Focusing particularly on progress since the 1995 Copenhagen Summit, they considered how these challenges can be met. Their deliberations will be referred to again later, but first it is useful to review the way social development has evolved over the years and to identify those factors responsible for achievements as well as disappointments.

Past achievements and disappointments

The historical evolution of social development has been extensively documented by academics, who have identified major phases in the development of the field. The earliest phase was community development, which was introduced by some colonial administrations in the years before the Second World War. It was subsequently adopted by many governments in the Global South. Another critically important phase was the creation of national economic and social planning in the 1960s and 1970s, when governments sought to transform their economies and raise standards of living. Another was the adoption of legally binding international treaties that gave expression to social rights by enshrining social interventions with clearly defined goals. A more recent and important phase was the spread of social protection, which involves the transfer of resources to people with financial needs to reduce poverty and deprivation.

Although it is generally recognised that social development has evolved progressively over the years, it is also accepted that there have been setbacks and disappointments. In some cases, these were the result of factors beyond the control of social development policy makers and practitioners. These include natural disasters, famines, changing global power relationships and, above all, violent conflict. Furthermore, the trajectory of social development has been subjected to changes arising from new theoretical ideas as well as ideological and policy shifts. Often, these changes emerged as a response to the challenges facing social development.

A major change resulted from widespread disillusionment with state-sponsored, national community development. In the 1960s community development was heavily criticised for its top-down and bureaucratic approach, corruption, budgetary constraints and exploitation by political parties. In response, a new activist approach to community development known as community participation or community action emerged. This approach was compatible with the struggle for human rights and political participation that characterised radical movements in many parts of the developing world at the time. A new body of literature that addressed issues which transcended the earlier state-sponsored approaches now emerged. Championed by nonprofits and community groups, this new approach also reflected the growth of feminist ideas and increasing activism on behalf of ethnic and religious minorities and indigenous people. Increasingly, local community associations organised by women and others facing discrimination began to play a key role in community-based social development. These developments ushered in a new phase in social development.

Another important change resulted from a reassessment of the impact of national economic and social planning. Although most governments embraced Keynesian economic management after the Second World War, this did not always result in significant social improvements. While some countries prospered, others stagnated and the original prediction that the developing countries would evolve along a similar linear evolutionary trajectory from subsistence agriculture to modern industrialisation did not materialise. However, a handful of countries, mostly in East Asia, successfully adopted export-led industrialisation policies which resulted in rapid economic growth

as well as a substantial increase in wage employment. Consequently, incomes and living standards improved. Economic growth also funded the expansion of education, health, housing and social protection.

Other countries were less successful and, despite recording reasonable rates of growth, their governments were unable to create mass wage employment on a sufficiently large scale to raise living standards. The result was what I called 'distorted development' (Midgley, 1994) in which the benefits of growth are asymmetrically distributed. While wealthy and middle-class families prosper, sprawling shantytowns, malnutrition and a lack of formal employment opportunities persist. Nevertheless, many governments of these countries were able to increase social spending modestly and there were improvements in school attendance, literacy and incomes. A third group of countries did not perform well and were characterised by economic stagnation and the perpetuation of poverty and deprivation. Most of these are in Central America, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

As it was recognised that divergent trends in social development had emerged, neologisms such as 'newly industrialised countries' (NICs) were coined to replace the term 'Third World', which had previously been adopted to categorise all developing countries. In addition, efforts were made to respond to international disparities. A major effort came from the Brandt Commission (1980), which urged that global resources be reallocated through aid as well as improvements in trade and economic exchanges. These measures would close the gap between what the Commission called the Global North and the Global South. The Commission's report was well received, and it was widely accepted that the social and economic problems facing the world's nations could be remedied through collaborative international efforts. A critical role in achieving this goal was assigned to multilateral agencies such as the United Nations and its affiliated organisations and the World Bank.

However, the Commission's recommendations were thwarted by new realities. Many developing countries had become indebted through injudicious borrowing and their economies stagnated. At this time, Keynesian economic management lost its appeal and neoclassical economic ideas, usually referred to as neoliberalism, became ascendant. As many indebted countries were compelled to turn to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for emergency aid, structural adjustment programmes and austerity policies were imposed. This had a profound impact on social development. A range of important social development programmes were retrenched, state enterprises were privatised, user fees were levied for health and education, civil servants were dismissed and subsidies were removed. Although it was predicted that these initiatives would stimulate economic growth, resolve the debt crisis and bring prosperity, the economies of many developing countries stagnated. Poverty rates and the incidence of malnutrition increased, and life expectancy and levels of educational attainment declined. In addition, countries faced with natural disasters and famines were unable to cope. As it became apparent that structural adjustment and the wider commitment to so-called free market economic development had failed to fulfil its promise, alternatives emerged. The World Bank sought to deal with the problem by

establishing what it called Social Funds, which were managed by nonprofits rather than governments. The funds, it was believed, would address the worst consequences of the structural adjustment programmes. Subsequently, the World Bank funded conditional cash transfers in some Latin American countries, notably Brazil and Mexico.

At the same time, the ethos of individualism, which characterised neoliberal thinking, diffused into social development, resulting in initiatives which focused on individuals and families rather than the state. One of these initiatives was the popularisation of micro enterprises and microcredit by which poor people and small groups, comprised mostly of women, established small businesses to improve their living standards. Another was the creation of individual savings accounts through which poor people were helped to save to meet their educational, housing and other needs. A new theoretical approach, which transcended neoliberalism but gave expression to individualist ideas, also emerged in the work of Sen (1999), which claimed that poverty could be reduced if people's capabilities were improved. These ideas also found expression in the livelihoods approach, which focused on individuals and households, and on the way that they could be supported to meet their own needs. These ideas minimised the role of governments, which had previously played a central role in social development and fostered yet another phase in the evolution of social development.

Another important change emerged when the United Nations and its affiliated agencies directly challenged the neoliberal approach. Behind the scenes, officials at the United Nations began to plan a major global event which would reassert the importance of governments in social development. The result was the World Summit on Social Development held in 1995 in Copenhagen. Attended by all of the organisation's members, including 117 heads of state, the Summit adopted the Copenhagen Declaration, which committed the world's governments to address poverty, promote employment and foster social integration. Five years later, the Millennium Summit expanded on these goals and provided further impetus for purposeful state intervention and international collaboration. In 2015, the Sustainable Development Summit broadened the scope of these initiatives by identifying no less than seventeen Goals consisting of 169 specific Targets which the member states of the United Nations are expected to meet by 2030. These SDGs seek to end hunger and poverty; combat inequalities; build peaceful, just and inclusive societies; protect human rights; promote gender equality and empower women and girls; ensure the protection of the planet and its natural resources; and promote equitable growth, shared prosperity and decent work. Notably, the Summit reflected the growing emphasis on ecological concerns and the impact of climate change, which had been previously addressed by the Brundtland Commission in 1983.

A major phase in the history of social development was the massive expansion of social protection in the Global South, which began with the introduction of conditional cash transfers. Further impetus for providing social protection stemmed from the expansion of existing social assistance schemes in several developing countries, in particular South Africa, India and China. This personified the idea, so eloquently expressed by Hanlon and his colleagues (2010), that poverty

can be solved by simply giving money to the poor. As funding of social assistance, public works and social allowances such as universal old age pensions increased, so poverty rates began to fall.

Because of the expansion of social protection and the implementation of the targets set by the Copenhagen Declaration, living standards and social conditions in the Global South improved significantly. International statistical data confirmed this trend. They reveal that the incidence of global poverty fell dramatically during the period beginning with the Millennium Summit in 2000 and the Sustainable Development Summit in 2015. The United Nations (2017) reports that the proportion of the world's population living in absolute poverty declined from 28 percent to 10.7 percent during this time – or a reduction from about 1.7 billion people to 767 million people. There were similar gains measured by other social indicators reflecting trends in life expectancy, health, nutrition and education attainment.

While the efforts of governments, supported by international agencies, donors and nonprofits to reduce poverty and improve social conditions are historically unprecedented, progress slowed after 2015. The World Bank (2020) observes that while global rate of absolute poverty fell by about one percentage point annually between 2000 and 2015, it decreased by only about half a percentage point annually between 2015 and 2017. The United Nations (2020) reached a similar conclusion, reporting that progress on other social indicators has slowed. This reversal can be attributed to the increasing severity of disasters resulting from climate change, which disproportionately affect poor people. Another factor is armed conflict, which has reached unprecedented levels. The lingering effects of the Great Recession of 2008 and the adoption of austerity policies by many governments also impeded progress. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation deteriorated dramatically and about 71 million people fell below the absolute poverty line.

Current realities and challenges

Although the Covid-19 pandemic no longer poses a major threat to human life, it's devastating social and economic effects continue to have a negative impact on economic and social conditions. At the time of the pandemic, the World Bank (2021) estimated that the global economy had shrunk by more than five percent from its 2019 pre-pandemic level, but recently it reports that the situation has improved somewhat. Western and especially East Asian countries have coped relatively well, but the outlook for Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America is less promising. Low-income countries are badly affected and may be heading into what the World Bank describes as a decade of disappointment. Overall, the World Bank believes that the global economy will experience a low growth trajectory for the foreseeable future. This will impede investments and the efforts of governments to address social needs.

Similarly, while social conditions in many countries improved, this is not the case in most low-income developing countries, where incomes and living standards stagnated or even deteriorated. In particular, poverty remains high and, according to the World Bank (2024), the global rate of absolute poverty is higher now than it was prior to the pandemic. The problem is most severe in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The United Nations' (2025) most recent annual report on

progress in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals also observes a worldwide stagnating trend in poverty reduction and concludes that the world is 'off-track' in its efforts to eradicate poverty by 2030.

The United Nations also reveals that malnutrition, ill health, child mortality, limited shelter and other adverse social conditions persist and present a continuing challenge. It notes that only a third of the targets set in 2015 are likely to be met, while limited progress has been made on achieving about a half of the targets. There has been either no progress or a regression with the remainder. In addition, it observes that gender oppression, inequality and a lack of democratic participation remain serious problems. The United Nations Children's Fund (2025) confirms that current conditions in much of the Global South continue to have a negative effect on people's and especially children's wellbeing. It reports that inadequate education, nutrition, health, nutrition and shelter conditions continue to have a negative impact on the wellbeing of one in five children globally (or about 417 million). Since there are only five years before the 2030 deadline, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guiterrez urges in his Foreword to the United Nations annual Sustainable Goals Report (2025) that efforts to reverse these trends must be intensified.

Social development today is also affected by the weakening of international law, which forms the basis of much social development policy and practice. Following the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (United Nations, 1948), the world's nations generally accepted that governments have an obligation to meet the social needs of their citizens, and most acceded to treaties that enshrined social rights. They also subscribed to the basic principles on which the United Nations was founded such as sovereignty, respect for national self-determination and non-aggression. Unfortunately, these obligations are now being brazenly flouted by some governments, which have invaded or encroached on the sovereignty of other nations and illegally occupied their territories. The rights of the citizens of these territories are ignored, and many have been brutally oppressed, and in some cases they have been illegally expelled from their homelands. Efforts by the United Nations Security Council to address these violations have been ignored or otherwise vetoed by the few member states that exert disproportionate power over the organisation. As a consequence of such contemptuous violation of international law, other treaties dealing directly with social issues have been undermined.

The frequent violation of international law is associated with the decline in democratic participation and the rise of authoritarian populism in several countries, including those with well-established democratic institutions. Unlike totalitarian dictatorships, which have been a regrettable political reality for decades, the new authoritarianism has emerged more recently as charismatic populist leaders have secured electoral majorities and systematically undermined judiciaries, weakened the press, stifled dissent and consolidated their power. This has negatively affected social development, which has historically been committed to popular participation and grassroots activism. In addition, leaders of the new populist right-wing movements have been forthright in denying the negative impact climate change and ecological damage, and in vilifying LGBTQ+ people, minorities, migrants and those holding different political views.

Another current reality which has a profound impact on social development is the frequent and unashamed use of brute military force by the governments of some countries that have killed and maimed so many civilians and destroyed homes and infrastructure. Sickening images of this violence now pervade daily news bulletins. Violence in the form of civil wars between different political factions, military leaders and ethnic and religious groups is common. Equally common is the use of force to kill and maim civilians who are believed to threaten ruling elites. The result is mass destruction as well as deaths and injuries on a massive scale. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (2025) reports that approximately 240,000 people were killed as a result of armed conflict in 2024-2025, with the highest number of deaths being recorded in Ukraine, Palestine/Gaza and the Sudan. This represents an increase of 23 percent since 2024. In addition, a historically unprecedented 122 million people were forcibly displaced by conflict during this time. In addition to the violence perpetrated by governments, no fewer than 380 armed militias use violence to subjugate civilian populations and currently about 240 million people worldwide live under their control. Many millions more suffer from the indirect consequences of violence as a result of its spillover economic and social effects. It is hard to see how social development goals can be met in the context of this appalling brutality.

Changing demographic realities also have implications for social development. As people live well beyond historical lifespan norms, populations are aging not only in high-income countries but all over the world. In many countries, fertility has fallen dramatically and the previous efforts of governments to control population growth has been reversed as some now seek to stimulate fertility instead. Another important demographic trend is migration, which has reached unprecedented levels. While only a small proportion of the world's population are international migrants, the United Nations (2025) reports that there are more than 300 million people in the world who were not born in their country of residence. Many are irregular migrants without proper documentation. Although most international migrants have moved to Europe and North America, significant numbers have migrated to countries within their home regions. In addition, there are large numbers of domestic or internal migrants, many of whom are refugees. Domestic migration also involves large numbers of people who move to seek employment usually in urban areas. These demographic realities pose a challenge to social development policy makers and practitioners. Apart from fostering the wellbeing and integration of migrants, they must deal with the discrimination, hostility and even violence to which migrants are subjected.

Another current reality is inadequate resources. Although resources have always been scarce, many governments are now unable to adequately fund social development projects and programmes. As mentioned earlier, many governments in the Global South incurred sizable debts as a consequence of the emergency funding measures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The problem is exacerbated by the decision of a number of Western countries to retrench their aid allocations. In 2025, the government of the United States was one of the first to cut its international aid budget, resulting in a sudden withdrawal of resources for a significant number of social projects in the Global South. Other governments followed and reductions in aid budgets were announced

by several European governments, including those of Britain, Sweden and Norway, which had historically contributed significantly. Although aid has always been controversial, and is often being used for ulterior purposes, these reductions pose a significant challenge to social development.

Future directions and possibilities

These realities certainly affect the future of social development. It is, of course, very difficult to predict the future with accuracy, but there can be little doubt, as a recent report from the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) (2025) observed, that social development is at a crossroads. It is impossible to predict whether this crossroad will lead to stagnation or even a decline in social and economic conditions, or whether the situation will change for the better. However, it is possible to speculate on what may emerge. In view of their assessment of past trends, many social development scholars will pessimistically conclude that things are likely to deteriorate further. On the other hand, some will adopt an optimistic view, believing that the progressive trajectory which characterised social development for many of the past decades will continue, and that the current challenges it faces will be overcome.

I myself remain stubbornly optimistic but, as I explained in the Kinduka Lecture given at the 22nd Biennial Conference of the International Consortium for Social Development (ICSD) in 2021 (Midgley, 2024), I pragmatically recognise that the long-term progressive trajectory of social development has been interrupted by many setbacks. Nevertheless, past disappointments have often been reversed and social development has been revitalised. I am inspired by Polanyi's (1944) analysis of the negative effects of nineteenth century capitalism, which concluded that despite overwhelming odds, a counter-movement emerged as workers campaigned to resist exploitation and as progressive political parties were elected to office and introduced extensive economic and social reforms. In addition, many committed individuals and their churches and local communities, as well as nonprofits, mobilised to curb the excesses of uninhibited capitalism. This counter-movement created a momentum that eventually overcame the horrors of poverty, inequality and exploitation for predatory capitalism.

A similar counter-movement may emerge as the realities of our present time are recognised. Fortunately, there are indications that this is already happening. Civil servants and politicians in many countries remain committed and work hard to maintain social development policies and programmes. Nonprofits as well as community groups also remain actively involved. Many people are deeply troubled by recent developments and are voicing their concerns through electoral participation and protest. Millions have participated in protests and activists are campaigning for progressive change. However, it should be recognised that in some countries their efforts have been brutally suppressed, and many have sacrificed their freedom and livelihoods. Some have been tragically murdered by ruthless dictatorial governments. Nevertheless, I believe that their contribution, and that of so many others who challenge the stark realities of oppression, poverty and inequality, will ultimately prevail.

In addition, there is an international resolve to address current realities. As noted earlier, the United Nations sponsored a major international gathering on social development in Doha in 2025, which recommitted the organisation's members to social development. Similarly, the vast majority of representatives at the United Nations General Assembly remain committed to international law and its dedication to human rights. In 2025, the Assembly regularly voted to express its disapproval of the few governments with veto power in the Security Council, who have condoned or been complicit in violations of international law. Although these votes have no legal force, they shame the offending governments and weaken their international reputation. These efforts are compatible with efforts at the 2025 Doha Summit to reinvigorate social development but, as its participants recognised, this will require more than the adoption of aspirational statements. Concrete measures such as the allocation of adequate funds, effective implementation and proper coordination will be needed. The challenges of poverty, oppression and deprivation facing the world today can only be overcome through an authentic global commitment of this kind. This will require the engagement of governments, international organisations, nonprofits, community groups and the millions of good people everywhere who believe that progressive change, welfare and social justice are possible.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

James Midgley is currently Professor at the Graduate School at the University of California, Berkeley, where he served as Dean of the School of Social Welfare and was Harry and Riva Specht Professor of Public Social Services until his retirement in 2016. He previously taught at the University of Cape Town, the London School of Economics and Louisiana State University. He has published widely on social development, social policy and international social welfare. Among his best-known works are *Social Development: The Developmental Perspective in Social Welfare* (1994), *Social Welfare for a Global Era* (1997, 2017), *Social Policy for Development* (2004), *Social Development: Theory and Practice* (2014), *Social Protection and Social Justice* (2019) and *Advanced Introduction to Social Protection* (2022). He is a member of the American Academy of Social Welfare and has received many awards, including three honorary doctorates – most recently, an honorary doctorate from his alma mater, the University of Cape Town (2020).

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