Socio-Economic Inequalities in Namibia: A Qualitative Social Work Study

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Abstract

Social work in Namibia is practised in a context marked by extreme levels of poverty and socio-economic inequalities. These interrelated challenges remain deeply entrenched despite several development efforts at national, regional and international level. As a social justice and human rights-oriented profession that has a global footprint, social work pledges to promote socio-economic equalities in view of realising a just and equal world. Such a structural emphasis on tackling socio-economic inequalities is a radical departure from the micro-level centred approaches that have historically dominated social work practice in Namibia. In this qualitative study, we explored 10 purposively selected Namibian social workers' perceptions of socio-economic inequalities through semi-structured one-on-one interviews. The findings indicate that social workers are intricately aware of the socio-economic inequalities that characterise the Namibian society, but that their focus on micro practice restricts them to deal with the structural causes that retain socio-economic inequalities. Adopting a developmental approach as policy framework for social welfare and social work will enable social workers to bridge micro and macro practice, challenge oppressive structures and contribute to social transformation and a just and sustainable world.

Keywords: socio-economic inequalities; poverty; developmental social work; social welfare; social development; neoliberalism; Namibia

Introduction

Socio-economic inequalities are an adverse feature of the global economy and the target of many national, regional and international development efforts. Key among these is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations 2015) which sets 17 sustainable development goals and 169 targets aimed at redressing poverty and socio-economic inequalities, while safeguarding the well-being of the planet. These far-reaching strategic objectives are echoed by Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want (African Union 2015), which aspires to promote inclusive social and economic development on the African continent. Despite these explicitly enunciated intentions to eradicate socio-economic inequalities, 71 per cent of the world's population live in countries in which inequalities have increased (United Nations 2021). Inequalities churn out social, economic and environmental injustices and are the target of social work efforts aimed at promoting sustainable communities and environments at various levels of intervention.

The rationale for the study was linked to the structural inequalities that are a salient feature of the Namibian political, socio-economic and cultural landscape. It was furthermore grounded in the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development Commitment to Action's (IFSW, IASSW, and ICSW 2012) call for social workers to utilise the profession's knowledge, skills and value base in promoting socio-economic equalities in their respective contexts. Apart from studies by Chiwara (2015) on social work's contribution to promoting social and economic equality and Chiwara and Lombard (2017) on the challenge to promote social and economic equality in Namibia through social work, there is a lack of Namibian studies that document social work's contribution in this regard or the challenges thereof.

The goal of the study was therefore to explore Namibian social workers' subjective understanding of socio-economic inequalities and their actual and perceived roles in redressing these inequalities. In this article, we begin with a contextual overview of the persistent and interrelated challenges of poverty and socio-economic inequalities in Namibia and the national development plans (NDPs) to deal with these. The social welfare sector and social work profession are also situated within this context. Thereafter, we outline the study's theoretical framework, which was embedded in social development, followed by the presentation and discussion of the study's research methodology and empirical findings. Lastly, we present conclusions and give recommendations in relation to social welfare and social work in Namibia.

Contextual Overview of Poverty and Socio-Economic Inequalities in Namibia

Namibia is situated on the south-western coast of Africa. It is a sparsely populated yet geographically vast nation of 2.5 million people (World Bank 2020). A former colony of Germany, Namibia was subsequently administered by the then South African

apartheid regime until its hard-won independence in 1990. Mineral revenues are the driving force behind its economy as Namibia is a mineral-rich country that is endowed with diamonds, copper, gold, lead, lithium and zinc and has the largest uranium deposits in the world (El Obeid 2021). It is also one of nine countries in Africa that are classified as upper middle-income nations, a status which it has held since 2009 (World Bank 2021). Its categorisation as such, however, has been a major source of contention especially in the upper echelons of the country's leadership. The country's president, Hage Gottfried Geingob, has on various national and international platforms called for its reversal, citing it as the "unfair", "superficial", and "so-called" classification of Namibia as an upper middle-income country (Republic of Namibia 2015, 4; 2016, 58). This classification by the World Bank, it is argued, is an inaccurate reflection of the state of the Namibian economy whose land, economic and other resources still lie in the hands of the minority white population (Nakale 2021). The irregular apartheid era system and processes mandated segregated development for white and black people. This severely restricted access to the nation's natural resources and socio-economic opportunities for the majority black population. These historical arrangements still have a profoundly negative impact on present generations of marginalised and mostly black communities as will be discussed in this article.

In the 24 years following independence, Namibia recorded a relatively high average annual growth of 4.4 per cent. This changed in 2016, when its economy went into a protracted recession owing to falling mineral commodity prices, recurrent disaster droughts and slow economic growth (World Bank 2021). The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has further worsened the country's economic downturn. Yet, considering its past steady economic growth, the extreme levels of poverty and socio-economic inequalities have significantly remained unchanged. Poverty, as measured by the country's upper-bound poverty line, catapulted to 64 per cent in 2020 (World Bank 2021). The country also records high incidences of conditions associated with poverty such as serious levels of hunger, child wasting, stunting, undernourishment and mortality (International Food Policy Research Institute, Concern Worldwide, Welthungerhilfe, and United Nations 2021).

The worrying trend of socio-economic inequalities amid abundant wealth and natural resource endowments is a well-acknowledged challenge that has been the target of the country's NDPs since independence. The country has had several such NDPs including the Transitional Development Plan (1990–1994), NDP 1 (1995–2000) and NDP 2 (2001–2004) (Republic of Namibia 1990b; 1995; 2001). In 2004, Namibia adopted Vision 2030 as its national policy framework for long-term national development until the year 2030 (Republic of Namibia 2004). Since its adoption, Vision 2030 has been implemented through a consecutive series of five yearly NDPs that are all anchored in the country's vision of significantly reducing socio-economic inequalities by 2030 (Republic of Namibia 2004; 2012). These include NDP 4 (2012–2017) and NDP 5 (2017–2022), which the country is implementing currently (Republic of Namibia 2017). Namibia has been highly resolute with regard to updating its NDPs every five years.

Their implementation has been grounded in a neoliberal economic framework, which makes Jauch (2012) and Kanyenze et al. (2017) question the country's commitment to achieving meaningful and sustainable socio-economic development.

It is interesting to mention that although the governing party, the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), ascribes to a socialist political and economic ideology, it elected to undergird the country's constitution in neoliberalism (Iikela 2021). This market-driven approach to development is noted by Taylor (2018) to create unfavourable social and economic conditions that undermine the populace's resilience and coping abilities. Inversely, Namibia's economic and political environment has been a breeding ground for a group of politically connected black elites who have appropriated immense wealth worth billions of Namibian dollars through corrupt, self-enriching business dealings. El Obeid (2021) observes in this regard that Namibia's vast natural resources have not always been allocated and utilised in a transparent manner as they disproportionately benefit a small number of wealthy elites, many of them affiliated to the ruling SWAPO party. The highly publicised Fishrot scandal attests to this current state of affairs (*Corruption Watch* 2020; Fabricius 2022). It is against this backdrop of pre- and post-independence development processes that the enigma of poverty and socio-economic inequalities amid progressive economic growth remains highly entrenched within the Namibian society. Evidently, it is the country with the second highest levels of income inequalities in the world (World Bank 2022).

Systems of social welfare emerge as outcomes of political and economic decision-making processes that are aimed to provide social and economic support to a nation's citizens in view of mitigating multiple deprivations that undermine their social functioning (Taylor 2018). Namibia inherited from apartheid an unjust, inequitable and highly fragmented social welfare system (Kamwanyah, Freeman, and Rose-Junius 2021; MoHSS 2008, 2010). Independence meant that service delivery had to align with the fundamental principles of equality, human dignity and non-racialism as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Namibia (1990a). However, the country did not adopt a social welfare policy framework to enunciate its vision for redressing past injustices and aligning social welfare service delivery with post-apartheid development priorities (Chiwara and Lombard 2017). Within its social welfare service delivery system, the country ascribes to a mixed economy of social welfare where government ministries, civil society, faith-based and community-based organisations all play a role, but fragmentation remains a major challenge (Republic of Namibia 2014; USAID 2013).

The welfare sector is constrained by persistent challenges that have a major impact on the provision of efficient and effective social welfare services. These include limited training, technical skills and supervision of its social welfare service personnel, insufficient data on service provision, and limited transportation, office space and other resources to render services (Chiwara and Lombard 2017; MoHSS 2008, 2010; UNICEF 2017; USAID 2013). Furthermore, social welfare services have largely been

remedial and curative (MoHSS 2008; USAID 2013). UNICEF (2017, 8) observes that "social welfare is not a major government priority" in Namibia. Such an austerity approach is evident of a macro-economic policy of neoliberalism (Dupré 2011). However, the country runs a non-contributory social protection programme aimed at mitigating vulnerability especially among children and older people. But, in keeping with its minimalistic approach to social welfare, a very low proportion of the country's annual budget is spent on social welfare services, while state-sponsored social grants are poorly targeted and remain at the level of a pittance (UNICEF 2017).

Namibia has around 598 social workers (Health Professions Council Namibia 2020), but this number is quite small given the need for social welfare services and translates to about one social worker for every 13 000 children in need of care (David 2021). Resultantly, social workers carry a heavier workload than they would otherwise do, while a large share of their work is spent on administrative tasks (USAID 2013). In this regard, practice is often mismatched with the contextual realities that call for macro-level structural interventions, such as advocating equal access to education and health services. Kamwanyah, Freeman, and Rose-Junius (2021) rightly note that for Namibia to deal with the myriad of socio-economic challenges that it faces, its social welfare system must be robust and holistic and geared towards redressing structural and institutional inequalities. Social development is cited as a preferable development approach through which the country can significantly redress socio-economic inequalities (Ananias and Lightfoot 2012; Kanyenze et al. 2017; Republic of Namibia 2014).

Theoretical Framework

Social development provided the theoretical lenses for the study. Social development can be seen as an intervention approach, an end goal of development, and a social welfare policy framework (Patel 2015). It is the practice theory that informs developmental social welfare and, therefore, developmental social work. In view of redressing socio-economic inequalities, social development postulates policies and programmes that manage and prevent social problems through building human capabilities, and protecting and promoting human rights, empowerment and social and economic inclusion (Patel 2015). It is furthermore underpinned by the belief that economic development should benefit poorer groups and deal with the distortions that have historically characterised economic development policies (Midgley 2017). It therefore stands in sharp contrast to the neoliberal development paradigm that prioritises economic growth over social welfare (Midgley 2014).

Social development draws guidance from social planning, human and social capital, entrepreneurship, microfinance, employment creation and other strategies that advance human rights and social justice (Midgley 2014). These strategies are deemed highly appropriate in contexts such as Namibia owing to the extreme levels of poverty and inequalities and the erosion of traditional family, community, and kinship care systems

(Kamwanyah, Freeman, and Rose-Junius 2021; Taylor 2018). Although social development strives to champion social and economic justice, it is worthwhile to mention that it does not occur spontaneously but requires deliberate political measures and budgetary allocations aimed at rendering socio-economic support to individuals, families and communities (Taylor 2018). In light of the imperative for sustainable development, there is a need to integrate environmental protection into social development initiatives. This is necessitated by the ever-increasing incidences of environmental calamities (Chiwara and Lombard 2018) that exacerbate poverty and socio-economic inequalities and have disproportionately negative effects on poor communities.

Research Methodology

In this study, we adopted a qualitative research approach, which is premised on the subjectivity and multiplicity of the participants' perspectives and is aimed at understanding people's behaviour and experiences from the research participants' points of view (Creswell 2014). The study had an exploratory research goal. We explored social workers' perceptions of socio-economic inequalities in Namibia and were guided by an instrumental case study design. Such a design involves the study of a case, which in the study encompassed a group of social workers, in view of providing insight into the issue (Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2012) of socio-economic inequalities.

In recruiting participants, we used purposive sampling which entailed the interviewing researcher, using her judgement in selecting a small sample of participants that had the relevant knowledge, experience and interest in the study topic. As qualitative samples are relatively small, the study sampled 10 participants and this enabled an in-depth exploration of the phenomena under study (Ritchie et al. 2014). The study's social work participants represented the mixed economy of social welfare in Namibia and were variably sampled from government ministries, a faith-based organisation and a local authority. Nine of the participants were female and one participant was male; this reflected the demographic trends of social workers in Namibia. The participants were relatively young graduates with one to 13 years of practice experience and were aged between 20 and 44 years (see Table 1). They practised in the central, northern and coastal regions of Namibia and represented diversity with regard to their fields of practice and targeted service users. In view of ethical considerations, pseudonyms are assigned to the participants in the presentation and discussion of the study's findings.

Table 1: Participants' biographical information

Pseudonym	Employer	Gender	Age group	Years of practice	Practice field
P-1A	Ministry 1	Female	25–29	3	Gender equality and child welfare
P-1B		Female	20–24	1	Gender equality and child welfare
P-2A	Ministry 2	Female	30–34	7	Youth services
P-2B		Female	25–29	3	Youth services
P-3A	Ministry 3	Male	35–39	13	Health
P-3B		Female	30–34	7	Health
P-3C		Female	30–34	3	Health
P-4A	Faith-based organisation	Female	40–44	1	Gender equality and child welfare
P-5A	Municipality	Female	30–34	11	Family services
P-5B		Female	30–34	3	Family services

In this study, we used semi-structured one-on-one interviews as a data gathering technique, of which eight were conducted face to face, while two were done telephonically. The interviews were voice recorded with the participants' informed consent in view of capturing the emergent in-depth information and ensuring the trustworthiness of the study's findings. As opposed to following a linear path, the data analysis in the study was guided by an iterative thematic data analysis process which resulted in five themes (Creswell 2014). Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the University of Pretoria on 3 July 2014 (reference number 13291069).

Findings and Discussion

Social workers' conceptualisation of socio-economic inequalities, factors that contribute to socio-economic inequalities and groups that are most affected by socio-economic inequalities were among the themes that emerged in the study. The findings also included social work's role in promoting socio-economic equalities and the challenges that undermine social work's contribution to promoting socio-economic equalities. The participants' narratives and literature perspectives are integrated in the discussion of these themes.

The participants conceptualised socio-economic inequalities in Namibia as the uneven distribution of wealth, opportunities and resources, which creates a societal divide and disparities in living conditions, access to employment, basic services, power and

income. Inequalities create unjust societal relations and are the basis for socio-economic inclusion and exclusion as stated by participants:

> An imbalance between the different groups of people . . . The way they access services . . . the living conditions . . . the work they do . . . and finances. There is the . . . rich who can afford to live a life which is well above a normal life. But the majority we find them in the low level, being the poor. (P-4A)

> A lack of fairness in the society whereby certain groups of people benefit more than others in terms of working opportunities, jobs, access to resources or services based on their levels of funds . . . or status. (P-2B)

Inequalities reinforce societal injustices and restrict equal access to opportunities and resources necessary for optimal social functioning and a fair and just society (DuBois and Miley 2019).

The participants situated inequalities within the political and macro level of society in which historical colonial and apartheid systems of governance created differential access to social and economic opportunities based on race, gender, class and ethnicity. In this regard, Participant P-5B asserted that "[inequalities have] to do with the past . . . When people were colonised, they were put into categories based on their ethnic groups . . . [some] still do not have the same opportunities."

Furthermore, colonisation and apartheid created deeply entrenched stigmatising mindsets in marginalised groups that hinder them from proactively seeking out the socio-economic opportunities that came with independence. In view of this, Participant P-5B commented:

> With independence, marginalised groups have had the opportunity but . . . they do not . . . exercise that opportunity. It has to do with their mentality . . . Somebody might think they do not have access [to opportunities] . . . or development is not coming to them, but it must also be the people themselves [they] . . . got to go and get the services.

Alongside historical political factors, the participants noted the socio-economic development processes that have reinforced structural inequalities in Namibia. For instance, Participant P-5A remarked that "politics play a role . . . the gap is just increasing between the rich and the poor in Namibia". It is well acknowledged that historical and existent political, economic, cultural and social orders have negative effects and unequal consequences for local and global communities (IFSW, IASSW, and ICSW 2012). These consequences are driven by capitalism and, in particular, neoliberal capitalism which is a socio-economic and political policy "with multiple levels of complexity, interests and impacts" (Spolander, Engelbrecht, and Sansfaçon 2016, 645).

In the Marxist view, wealth accumulation leads to the concentration of economic, social and political power in the hands of capitals and a reduced role for government (Dupré 2011). It operates from a "profit-over-people-and-planet imperative" which has taken on global proportions (Ledwith 2020, xiv). The reach of neoliberal capitalism is accelerated through globalisation which creates new social problems that influence social work practice and social service delivery (Dominelli 2010). Neoliberal capitalism therefore reduces finances for social welfare services and the ways in which services are delivered (Strydom et al. 2017). Cutbacks in public expenditure on health, welfare, education and housing affects vulnerable people (Sewpaul 2016) and shows the interrelatedness of poverty and inequalities (Chiwara and Lombard 2020).

The San and the OvaHimba people are regarded as the most marginalised communities in Namibia and are therefore prioritised by Vision 2030 in relation to affording them access to socio-economic opportunities (Republic of Namibia 2004). It is well recognised that women, children, older people, ethnic minorities, rural communities and people living with disabilities are disproportionately affected by socio-economic inequalities, as was also evident in this study.

In Participant P-1A's view, older people bear the brunt of inequalities as they assume the responsibility of "taking care of the children who are born by people who suffer from economic inequalities". Participant P-3B concurred that "the elderly . . . are taking care of their granddaughters and sons and . . . they cannot work . . . It links back to financial problems as most of them cannot afford a basic life." The participants therefore attested to the high burden of care for orphans and vulnerable children that is largely borne by older people. This reality exists within the context of Namibia being one of the countries in Africa that has been hard hit by Aids (Kalomo et al. 2018). In reference to the locality where she worked, Participant P-5B noted that "at almost every second or third house . . . there is someone who is HIV positive". She therefore hinted to the high incidences of risks and vulnerabilities in marginalised communities. In relation to ethnic minorities, Participant P-3A observed:

> Certain sections of the society are not getting jobs like . . . marginalised communities such the San and the Himba . . . Most of these groups . . . are illiterate . . . cannot stand in front of the job market and . . . lack of access to information.

The participants also observed that in a highly patriarchal society such as Namibia cultural norms reinforce inequitable social relations with women being highly affected by societal inequalities. More so, as they traditionally depend on men for financial support. Consequently, they suffer gender-based violence:

> Men were brought up to believe that women are subordinates to men, whatever the man says the women should obey. When they [women] speak back, it's a problem and then the violence starts. (P-1B)

> [Some women] . . . are being abused or the husband or boyfriend is denying them access [to their rights] . . . They are dependant . . . we ask them why are you still in the house? Why don't you move out? [They respond] No! Where will I go? (P-5B)

The Constitution of the Republic of Namibia (1990a) acknowledges that Namibian women have traditionally suffered discrimination, oppression and socio-economic exclusion. In redressing these injustices it asserts that women must be "enabled to play a full, equal, and effective role in the political, social, economic, and cultural life of the nation". Although Namibia has progressive laws that champion gender equality, the participants did not see these as benefiting the intended groups owing to challenges in implementation. In this regard, Participant P-3A lamented that "these policies are there – lying in people's offices, but the people who are supposed to implement them are not doing so". Participant P-3B similarly retorted that gender equality "laws are there but they are not implemented effectively". Herestofa (2021) observes a serious disparity between the country's gender equality legislation and the pervasive socio-cultural norms that view women as inferior to men. Evidently, legal frameworks to assure equality between men and women require specific plans and resources for their implementation and effectiveness (DuBois and Miley 2019). Otherwise, "the problems that are faced by the vulnerable groups will just continue" (Participant P-3A).

In the context of persisting inequalities in Namibia, the participants confirmed a role for social work in promoting socio-economic equalities as they work directly with disenfranchised individuals, families, groups and communities. It is interesting to note that while participants conceptualised socio-economic inequalities as having structural causes, they delineated for themselves micro-level brokerage roles with individual client systems as the targets for change and intervention. In this regard, Participant P-2B mentioned that social workers "act like a middleman [intermediary] . . . linking people on the grassroots level . . . to service providers". In keeping with a micro-level focus, Participant P-1A retorted that "the most used strategy is casework . . . based on what the clients need . . . we motivate and refer them [to relevant service providers]". Participant P-2A also highlighted that the commonest intervention that she utilised was "referral . . . to other ministries . . . especially for [fees] exemption letters".

However, referral does not mean that service users will necessarily access the desired services and resources. In this regard, Participant P-3C submitted that "it's not all of the clients that we deal with [refer] that manage to get access to these rights because of economic [and other] barriers". Participant P-4A admitted that referring service users from one organisation to another especially in the absence of the assurance that they will access the required services is "disempowering". In keeping with these views, social workers in Namibia are perceived as fulfilling micro-level functions with troubled individuals, families and groups. A typical example is that in the multistakeholder partnerships for Vision 2030 micro-level roles related to identifying cases of child abuse and taking remedial action are specifically ascribed to social work (Republic of Namibia 2004).

In addition, the participants identified for themselves outreach and education roles that were directed at conscientising marginalised groups about their constitutional rights. Participant P-3A reported in this regard that "vulnerable groups . . . are not sensitised . . . they don't know their rights . . . if you don't know your human rights . . . you cannot even demand services for betterment". The participants highlighted that they were affiliated to professional networks such as "the Namibian Child Rights Network" (Participant P-4A) and the "West Coast Social Workers Association" (Participant P-3B), which conducted outreaches to educate target groups on their rights to education, healthcare, employment, shelter, food, national identity documents and social grants. They also utilised the commemoration of key days such as "the National Disability Day, the International Day for Older Persons, World Aids Day, the International Day for People with Disabilities" (Participant P-3A) to spread awareness on the rights of service users. It is quite evident that the participants' interventions were meant to create an awareness of available social services and were primarily directed at changing the service-seeking behaviour of service users. They were therefore not aimed at altering the systems that produce and reinforce structural inequalities. Neither were they targeted at holding duty bearers accountable for the fulfilment of marginalised groups' rights to education, health and employment, among other social and economic rights. This is a challenge for social workers if they are committed to promoting social and economic equality as change is required at a macro level to redress the structural causes of inequality, service deficits and social justice (Strydom et al. 2017).

The participants were asked for their views on social work's role in facilitating skills training programmes for employment creation and income generation. Participant P-3B observed that "social workers have a role to play in promoting skills training but . . . they are not involved". In Participant P-1B's view, however, "it's not one of the things that I am supposed to do because . . . our ministry is more like for children [child welfare]." Participant P-2B perceived social work's role in the above in relation to rendering micro-level brokerage services. She remarked that

> When it comes to skills training, social workers can easily recommend the most vulnerable groups . . . to benefit from skills training . . . and those who are impoverished [who] . . . don't have any support systems . . . to vocational training centres.

Participant P-3A acknowledged that his organisation does not provide funding for projects, "so, the only way is to link with other organisations." He therefore referred persons living with disabilities and HIV and Aids to organisations that supported them by setting up welding, carpentry, sewing, poultry and handicrafts projects for income generation and domestic consumption. Participants P-4A and P-5B, from a faith-based organisation and a local authority, were the only ones who acknowledged that their organisations allocated budgets for community work projects that transcended outreach and community education roles. On her part, Participant P-4A facilitated "a tablecloth making [project for survivors of domestic violence to] . . . sell and have an income". Participant P-5B noted that "in our city we have a budget for social development . . .

Last year we had the nanny training for domestic [workers] because we thought . . . if we train them, they will get a nanny job." Collectively, the participants' interventions fell short of altering the status quo of socio-economic inequalities. Towards this end, developmental social work is a context-based form of practice that is indigenous to South Africa but is applicable to similar contexts such as Namibia.

As a distinct form of social work practice that is suited to African contexts, developmental social work integrates social and economic goals to redress poverty and inequalities (Lombard 2019). Furthermore, it bridges the micro–macro practice divide that has historically characterised social work practice (Patel 2015). It emphasises social change, but not at the cost of personal issues and individual difficulties because individual and structural changes are dealt with simultaneously as these levels are interrelated and affect each other (Hick and Murray 2009). By adopting a structural approach, social work adopts the "twin goals of alleviating the negative effects of an exploitative and alienating social order on individuals, while simultaneously aiming at transforming society" and by understanding that "the personal is political" overcome the "perceived duality between 'structures' and 'individuals'" (Hick and Murray 2009, 89). Developmental social work also utilises strengths, asset-based and non-discriminatory approaches to promote social and economic inclusion and sustainable development (Lombard 2019). It, however, requires an enabling environment for the optimal delivery of social welfare services that is mandated by a developmental social welfare policy, coupled with the training and deployment of social welfare service workers and the financing, monitoring and evaluation of social welfare programmes.

The participants identified staff shortages, a fragmented social welfare sector, little to no training in developmental social work and the lack of an institutional mandate for developmental social work as undermining social work's contribution to socio-economic equalities. Participant P-3C noted that "a lot of [social welfare] organisations don't have social workers . . . because we are very few". This reality is corroborated by several national and international reports (MoHSS 2010; Petersen 2021; UNICEF 2017). So is the fragmentation and lack of collaboration and uniformity in the social welfare sector which are reported to contribute to the "duplication of services" (Participant P-3B) and to hinder efficient and effective social welfare service provisioning (MoHSS 2010; UNICEF 2017). The participants cited that little to no training in developmental social work had an impact on their abilities to engage in transformational practice. In this regard, Participant P-3A remarked that

> The lack of involvement of social workers . . . [in] social development . . . has to do with the [local social work] curriculum . . . [which] needs to be revisited . . . [to] focus . . . on . . . social development . . . economic equality, social equality, and human rights.

The impact of neoliberalism that reflects in the lack of an institutional mandate for developmental social work was evidenced by the participants' organisational scope of practice which limited them to micro-level practice. This is in addition to the lack of

allocated budgets for transformative programmes. Hence, Participant P-3B lamented that "there is no money . . . even to do projects".

Conclusion

Socio-economic inequalities remain rampant in Namibia despite decades of enunciated commitment to ending them as enshrined in Vision 2030 and the country's five-year-long NDPs. Although inequalities have historical roots, they thrive in the context of a neoliberal development agenda that treats social welfare as an afterthought. As the country's economic growth has not succeeded in redressing pervasive socio-economic inequalities, deliberate measures to integrate social and economic development are required with a particular emphasis on the most affected groups.

The study's findings attest to the fact that social workers are intricately aware of the socio-economic inequalities that characterise the Namibian society. As frontline workers in the social welfare sector, social workers witness the human impact of unjust societal relations and the resultant differential access to socio-economic opportunities. They are, moreover, cognisant that socio-economic inequalities have structural causes, yet their role in challenging socio-economic inequalities is limited as their interventions are relegated to the micro level.

Political liberation has not brought about the social and economic freedoms that inspired struggles for national liberation in many countries across Africa (Taylor 2018). In the context of austerity, it is of great concern to social work that the human costs are easily ignored when neoliberal policy goes uncriticised (Spolander, Engelbrecht, and Sansfaçon 2016). Sewpaul (2016, 32) indicates that it is "morally indefensible" that profit is prioritised above humans as in the case of the free market where poor people's health, education, safety and food security are threatened. Government spending must be channelled to increase employment and unburden pressures on poor people (Dupré 2011).

As social welfare policy and services are shaped by macro-economic policy, social workers should not allow the erosion of their critical views to resist market-based solutions to social problems (Spolander, Engelbrecht, and Sansfaçon 2016). This includes consciousness of responding to globalisation which is an ongoing concern of social work policy and practice (Sherman 2016). The developmental approach recognises the global and local interconnectedness of poverty and inequality as structural injustices (Lombard 2019). It requires a world view from a broader, socio-economic and cultural perspective which assists social workers to understand what makes societies unequal and the ways in which social ills contribute to discrimination, exclusion and injustices (Lombard 2019).

A social welfare policy embedded in a developmental approach and political buy-in is important in creating an enabling environment for developmental social work. Working

with social service users at the micro level is inadequate unless the structural causes of social and economic inequalities are dealt with. Social workers must challenge unjust practices, societal norms and systems that create and perpetuate adverse socio-economic conditions.

As part of their macro-level roles, social workers can actively contribute to the pursuit of Vision 2030 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through identifying and prioritising the needs of marginalised communities and lobbying government to dedicate resources for developmental social welfare services. Social workers must highlight oppressive structures in the multilayered forces that comprise them, and in doing so create an awareness of oppression as being interrelated at structural, cultural and personal levels (Hick and Murray 2009).

We recommend the adoption of a developmental approach as a policy framework to guide social welfare and social work service delivery. Social workers should challenge injustices and inequality at micro and macro practice levels to contribute to social change gradually and incrementally, as "small changes eventually aggregate to significant and radical transformations" (Hick and Murray 2009, 89).

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