Tackling social exclusion is a major aim of social policy in other countries of the European Union, and in Central and Eastern Europe. The absence of such an aim in the United Kingdom has profound implications for the practice of social work. If we are not to become even further out of step with what is happening elsewhere, we need to focus on social work roles within a social development context.

KEY POINTS:

Other countries of the European Union target their limited resources within a framework of reducing social exclusion.

* As part of the democratisation process in Central and Eastern Europe, social workers play an important role in the redefinition of relationships between individuals, independent organisations and the state: the Civil Society.

* Both these trends imply a form of practice for social workers which fuses individual and community work.

* This in turn suggests the need for joint training of social workers and community workers.

* Ideas of citizenship which view citizens primarily as consumers are unlikely to meet adequately the challenges facing social care in the United Kingdom.

* United Kingdom social work needs to learn about developments elsewhere, and to learn from them.
Social exclusion

For our fellow Europeans in the European Union (EU) a major purpose and cornerstone of social policy is the promotion of the 'good society' through the development of policies which reduce social exclusion among their citizens. Social exclusion is defined as the process through which individuals or groups are partially or wholly excluded from participation in their society. Such exclusion can result from limited access to employment, benefits or social services.

Policy responses

Policy responses to social exclusion are usually focused on two dimensions:

* targeting benefits more effectively on those individuals and groups

* promoting a wide range of policies that enhance social inclusion or social solidarity.

Many policies are in the area of social protection. They involve the financial measures necessary to alleviate poverty, particularly structural poverty caused by unemployment or by limited access to the means of earning a living because of discrimination or disability. They tackle issues such as poverty in old age, and poverty associated with long term economic decline in particular regions.

Welfare measures adopted include those focusing on the workplace, such as health and safety at work, controls on the number of hours people can work, and encouraging employers to make provisions for adequate maternity and paternity leave.

This approach to social policy brings together both fiscal and welfare measures. Its legislative base is the Maastricht Treaty, in particular the Social Chapter. The United Kingdom has, however, opted-out from the Social Chapter, although some points are being adopted through health and safety legislation, or by employers on an ad hoc basis. However, the opt-out does create substantial difficulties in developing the baseline from which collective discussion can take place on pan-EU social policy developments.

The opt-out has also held back discussion in the United Kingdom on the role of social workers as agents in the fight against social exclusion, and the development of a model of practice that can incorporate a broader community focus as well as an individual or family approach.

Civil Society

As these developments have been taking place in the EU, in Central and Eastern Europe the emphasis has been on what is called the Civil Society. Following the collapse of the centralised
welfare bureaucracies of the Communist years, the individual's relationship with the State is being redefined from one of subjection to Party organisations, to one of free association through involvement in what is now a huge diversity of community-based groups.

This has included the development of a range of organisations and groups contributing to the provision of welfare services. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), not-for-profit organisations and private care agencies are helping to create the new welfare mix necessary to provide services previously the monopoly of the State.

All this activity is transforming not only the structure of welfare but also the people participating in it. Notions of community action are being revived, with social workers playing a key role in channelling the energy released through the changes.

Civil Society is not just about the development of community activity. It is also about solidarity and social inclusion. Through strengthening families, neighbourhoods, voluntary associations and self-help groups, participation in such effort is building the idea of democracy and human rights from the foundations. Such a process can be genuinely empowering. The new groups may co-operate or clash, both with each other and with the state. Individuals and groups previously not acknowledged or recognised may now form themselves into associations to lobby for their cause, and also to educate or re-educate the general public about their needs.

An example from Russia

Each country has to work out how to tackle social exclusion in the context of its own history of social welfare provision. The increasingly active role played by the associations of disabled people in Russia illustrates one approach. Created by Stalin during the 1930s as an integral part of the machinery of state, the associations were essentially for establishing factories and organising labour within these; and a political force attempting to ensure the maintenance of privilege through pension rights.

They undertook this in an environment that recognised impairments produced by war and conflicts, but failed to acknowledge impairments with other causes. (There was - and remains - little understanding of the way in which society disables people with impairments.)

Following the collapse of the Communist regime and the subsequent economic catastrophe, disabled people formerly entitled to privilege pensions have found these suddenly withdrawn. Disabled people previously employed in state enterprises are out of work. Those who have spent many years isolated in their flats have had to seek access to food and clothing, now available only for purchase on the street.

In order to meet the new challenges the associations have had to revise their objectives fundamentally and to reshape their relationships with their members, the community and the state.
They have had to build independence from the state, while still retaining a close partnership in order to ensure the development of appropriate services and the continuation of financial support. A major task is to provide the information disabled people need to enhance the capacity to take control over their lives. The National Institute for Social Work, in partnership with the Russian-European Trust, is assisting in setting up an information and advice centre for disabled people in the Moscow region, as a collaborative venture between the disabled people’s associations and the Moscow regional state administration. The centre is managed and run by disabled people.

Such developments provide a useful service for disabled people. They offer the administration a vital insight into the lives and needs of a hitherto almost unknown part of Russian society. This process of change moves the associations on from being closely identified with the bureaucracy of state, to non-governmental organisations independently speaking for their constituents and reclaiming a place in society.

Towards an inclusive approach

In the countries of the EU which are concerned with reducing social exclusion, activities similar to those in Central and Eastern Europe take place through involving people in the planning and delivery of welfare services. It is recognised that conscious efforts have to be made to reframe the welfare services in post-industrial societies in ways which enhance an inclusive approach. In the United Kingdom as elsewhere, this manifests itself in a new emphasis on user involvement and ideas of empowerment.

This approach is not without difficulties, not least because of the many different meanings which can be attached to such words and phrases. For some, they are a matter of citizenship rights, while for others they suggest a move to better marketing and the adoption of the consumerism of the commercial world. This mixture of consumerism and citizenship has characterised the progress of user involvement in the Western democracies as well as providing models for the organisation of services.

In the United Kingdom the community care reforms have clearly been influenced by the view that those receiving services are consumers with a choice, dealing in the welfare market for services to meet their needs. At the same time, notions of citizenship have been set out in Government pronouncements. Their clearest manifestation has been in the development of the Citizen’s Charter and the subsequent adoption of standards for the provision of public services. This process again stressed the role of citizen as consumer, with rights to service of a declared standard and the right to complain if such standards are not being met. With this view of citizenship, less emphasis is placed on an active role for individuals in the creation and development of welfare policy, in contrast to the emphasis stemming from ideas of social inclusion or the Civil Society.
However, discussion on the nature of citizenship and the relationship between individuals, communities and the state is increasing. Notions of the ‘stakeholder’ society, and the influence of communitarian ideas from the United States, are having an impact on social policy developments and the reform of the Welfare State.

**Implications for social care in the United Kingdom**

Such developments will inevitably change what is required of social workers, and hence their practice. The advent of smaller unitary authorities has already led to a questioning of the organisation of service provision. Greater emphasis is now being placed upon integrated community based human services incorporating education, social care, leisure, housing and environmental services. With this integrated approach the role of social worker as community development worker will come more to the fore.

The division of social work from community development occurred about twenty-five years ago, leading to separate training and patterns of work. The challenges of reducing social exclusion through working with those individuals and groups currently denied access to employment or services demands new approaches. These must incorporate both the understandings drawn from current social work practice and those from community development.

Decreasing resources - particularly in the community care sector - also require new approaches. Lessons from the emerging countries of Central and Eastern Europe struggling to maintain services in the face of almost total collapse could be applied to countries such as the United Kingdom. Building a community infrastructure with emphasis on self-help and participation could provide a useful additional contribution to the current contract culture of the welfare market.

**Conclusion**

Social care - and the Welfare State more generally - is facing many challenges currently in the United Kingdom. In facing those challenges, there is much to be learned from the rest of the European Union about ideas of social inclusion, and from Central and Eastern Europe about the Civil Society.

**For further information**

For further information about the developments described in this Briefing contact John Warwick, Director of the International Centre at the National Institute for Social Work (NISW). The International Centre is involved in development work in a wide range of countries. Staff of the Centre also organise programmes for people coming to the United Kingdom from abroad, and for
people here who are going abroad.

The Briefing is part of a series produced by NISW to highlight issues of concern to the personal social services and those who make use of them. Briefings may be purchased individually or by subscription to the series from Publications, NISW, 5 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9SN, Tel.0171-387 9681, Fax: 0171-387 7968.