The Role of the Community in Emerging Social Service Delivery Systems in the United States and Europe: Building on the Principles of Jane Addams and John Dewey

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The United States is experiencing a major shift in health and human service delivery systems toward community-based programs to help marginalized and disadvantaged people become more self-sufficient. The reform efforts are a response to a growing disenchantment over the rising incidence of negative social indicators such as: child abuse and neglect, impoverished single mothers and their children, overall crime rates, and dependence on public social assistance. There has been considerable disagreement as to the cause of the increase in these indicators, but over the past two decades it has become generally accepted by politicians and policy makers that the increases are a result of three overlapping factors: One factor is a perceived excessive reliance on publicly funded social services over which communities have little control. The second factor is the belief that there has been a diminishing role by individuals, families and communities in assuming their personal and civic responsibilities. The problems have been compounded by low wages in jobs available to youth and semi-skilled workers, growing disparity between rich and poor, and declining access to health care for workers and families.

The third factor behind reform efforts is disenchantment with the current systems of public federal and state human services which are viewed as ineffective and inefficient because they are, fragmented and uncoordinated. It is argued that there has been extensive wasteful duplication of services, ineffectiveness from overlapping assessment and treatment, unaddressed needs from gaps in services, and inefficiency from uncoordinated service plans without provisions for assessing performance. The current systems are also charged with inadequate use of existing informal networks and support systems available from families and in communities. Reformers further suggest that there has been little success in developing collaboration between education, civic and business leaders, elected officials, local government administrators and professional service providers that is a necessary condition for sustainable employment and efficient human service delivery systems.

The response to these conditions has been widespread of state and federal initiatives designed to reform not only welfare programs, but the entire system of how social services are provided. These efforts represent a radical departure from decades of categorical professional
services that have been largely driven by federal funds and mandates. The new programs are
aimed at broadening the family and community=s responsibility for cost effective and efficient
services that reduce dependency on publicly funded human services. This movement has major
implications for social work practitioners and educators, as well as for individuals and families
who receive such services. At both national and state levels this emerging process is
characterized by locally administered interdisciplinary multi-service agencies with streamlined
points of entry to services and greater collaboration of services. It is very much an effort to
develop a new level of cooperation and program coordination in local communities and
neighborhoods to address social issues that impact everyone.

**Theoretical Basis for Reform**

The need for reformed service delivery systems is well documented and the rational for
increased community-based programs is well argued from a programmatic perspective.
However, the theoretical base for reform has not been well developed and, in fact, is essentially
absent from most discussions about the reform movement. This is somewhat understandable
given the American penchant for practical approaches to problem solving. It is, nonetheless,
surprising given that there is an existing conceptual framework that provides a strong
philosophical and theoretical basis for sweeping reforms. That framework is pragmatism which,
relative to social programs, is the legacy of an American philosopher, John Dewey, and a social
worker, Jane Addams. One prominent aspect of Dewey and Addams= pragmatism is the notion
that socially and economically viable and healthy communities are contingent on
interdependence, interaction, communication, scientific assessment, and education. In the case
of Addams, the notion of interdependence as a critical aspect of social services was related to the
value of seeing individuals as part of an Aorganic whole@, a precursor to idea of
Aperson-in-environment@ that continues to play a prominent role in social work practice. For
Dewey, interdependence within communities was part of his notion of Aradical connection@
which is essential to the establishment of a democratic and socially responsible society.
Addams and Dewey, who were close personal friends, as well as professional colleagues, used
the philosophical concepts of pragmatism in developing the Settlement House movement and
laying the foundation for practice-based education, respectively.

**Civil Society and Social Exclusion**

Clearly related to the ideas of Addams and Dewey are two contemporary perceptions
rapidly taking hold in Europe that reflect a shifting emphasis on social security and social service
programs in Europe toward greater community and public involvement. These are the concepts of Asocial exclusion@ and of Acivil society.@ These terms are not widely used in the discussions
on human service reforms in the United States. However, it is useful to put the current
government initiated, and publicly supported, reform measures in the United States into a context
that provides a conceptual link to the rationale for reform in order to better understand the larger
systemic effort to rebuild communities and families as the primary source for social services. Moreover, addressing the problem of social exclusion by strengthening the components of civil society fits well with the goals and values of social work education in the United States to produce students who will be skilled at multiple levels of intervention and also be actively engaged in community activities both as professionals and as public citizens in promoting integrated systems of social service delivery.

**Social Exclusion:** The concept of social exclusion was developed in the late 1980s in Europe in an attempt to broaden the concept of poverty. The intention was to develop a concept that uses more than just the typical measures of income status when referring to individuals, or groups of individuals, who are experiencing economic or social difficulties or isolation. The idea of a new concept was to ensure sensitivity to issues of limited access to employment, benefits and social services, as well as to restricted avenues of participation in decision making. The members of the European Union finally agreed to using the term social exclusion to refer to the dynamic processes that form the basis of poverty (inadequate social programs, low paying jobs, single parenthood, mental illness, addictions, discrimination, inadequate education, and other factors that often lead to marginalization). The operative phrase is dynamic processes which makes the concept more multidimensional than poverty and more attentive to the constantly evolving environmental factors that contribute to economic and social dependency.

During the discussions on how to address the problem of social exclusion and promote the notion of social inclusion, I was struck by the references that were similar to terminology used in the social welfare reform initiatives in the United States. Many familiar buzz words and phrases were heard, such as: family involvement and responsibility, individualization of programs (more flexible, adaptable), local assessment and goal setting, community involvement in the delivery of services, contracting between agencies and clients, social partnerships, case management, and capacity building.

What is of particular interest is that the use of such terms at an international conference on social security is a truly radical development. Heretofore, discussion has focused exclusively on the income and economic aspects of social security systems. My guess is that the interest in Europe to broaden approaches to addressing economic and social problems is for much the same reason it is becoming more prevalent in the U.S.; namely, the recognition of the need to control the level of cash benefits (entitlement) programs by shifting some of the burden to benefits-in-kind (services) provided by the family and community. The more comprehensive definition also supports the rationale for more systemic assessments of social problems and a more systemic approach to problem-solving.

On the one hand, limiting cash benefits (if not reducing them) may well have profoundly negative consequences for many needy people. This is even more likely in the U.S. were there
are significantly weaker non-cash benefits to help ease the loss (health care, child care, housing, etc.). On the other hand, the broadening of the concept of poverty makes it easier to argue for an array of multiple, integrated and coordinated programs that will require a radical restructuring of service delivery. To be sure, few, if any, policy makers in the U.S. refer to the opposing concepts of social exclusion or social inclusion. Similar to solutions proposed in Europe, however, are reform measures that are “development” rather than “static.” Another similarity is the emphasis on a multifaceted approach (informal, interdisciplinary, local capacity, community-based, consumer involved) which is also within the context of integrated service delivery systems.

**Civil Society:** The concept of civil society is essentially a framework for combating social exclusion and promoting social inclusion. Towards this end, it is aimed at reducing dependency by strengthening the individual’s relationship with public programs through increased involvement in community-based groups (non-government organizations - NGOs, not-for-profit organizations, private care agencies, religious organizations, etc.). The civil society is thus directly related to the emerging emphasis on an appropriate welfare mix of government and non-government programs, for-profit and not-for-profit agencies, professional and voluntary benefits and services. As such, the strengthening of the “civil society” it is not only about restructuring “welfare as we know it,” it is also about reviving the sense of social values, participation and communication (information, discourse, dialogue) that are prerequisites for a viable process of social protection and democracy.

In a recent presentation at an international conference in Denmark sponsored by the International Social Security Association and the European Union, a list of four critical policy functions was provided that summarizes the desirability of a focus on integrating the various systems essential to addressing the problems of social exclusion and promoting civil society (Berghman, 1996):

- the demographic and legal system - which promotes civic integration,
- the labor market - which promotes economic integration,
- the welfare system - which promotes social integration, and
- the family and community system - which promotes interpersonal integration.

There have been a number of related publications that emphasize the growing interest in discussing human service reform within the context of social exclusion and civil society reflective of pragmatic philosophy of Dewey and Addams. Some of these are listed below:


• The resurgence of poverty and the struggle against exclusion: A new challenge for social security? Ed McCumiskey, Secretary-General, Department of Social Welfare, Ireland.


• Assuming the risk of dependency? What role for families and social security? Claude Perinel, Director for Social Policy, National Old-Age Insurance Fund, France.