Group work and social enterprise: using group members' skills for social and economic development

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Abstract: *Poverty is a major issue of concern worldwide and rife in South Africa. Minority groups such as women suffer the most and often have little or no access to opportunities for employment. Social workers have an obligation toward social and economic justice. Although small social enterprises cannot get rid of poverty, it can provide a pathway to address several challenges thereof. This article provides a discussion of a case study from South Africa where a groupwork project assisted in developing and expanding a social enterprise to combine social and economic development. Groupwork with its aim of support, growth, mutual aid and cohesion provides an ideal medium to identify, enhance and use the skills and capacities of group members to manage their challenges, and in the process, to enhance their sense of self-worth. It is recommended that social workers need knowledge and skills of entrepreneurship to facilitate the development of sustainable social enterprises. However, multi-stakeholder involvement can assist in the aim of such ventures to work towards sustainability. In this discussion of a case study, and with a strength perspective as foundation, three groups of unemployed individuals were formed that made conference bags and key rings while discussing life issues. Using meso skills can bridge the divide to address macro issues.*

Keywords: social work; groupwork; group work; social enterprises; South Africa; social and economic development

Introduction

In their practice, social workers have an important responsibility toward marginalised groups and populations at risk, irrespective of whether social workers operate at the micro level (individual), meso level (families and small groups) or macro level (organisations and communities) (Zastrow, 2012). This responsibility requires them to work towards social and economic justice, with a strong focus on addressing poverty, unemployment and discrimination (Kirst-Ashman, 2013; Segal et al, 2019). Social workers are well-positioned to address the issues of poverty, unemployment and inequality at all levels, but they need to be equipped with specific skills and training to enable social change toward transformation (Vungkhanching and Black, 2012; Nandan et al, 2015; Smith et al, 2017; Zastrow, 2017), for example, by engaging in social enterprise.

Social enterprise is not a new concept in the field of community services (Gray et al, 2003), but, surprisingly, little or no prior literature on using social work with groups for social enterprise development in South Africa is available – a gap this article aims to remedy. The article argues that social workers in general, and particularly social workers using group work as an intervention method, can assist people in need to establish social enterprises to generate an income. The argument is based on the outcomes of a case study where group work was combined with social enterprise.

Borzaga and Galera (2012) describe a social enterprise as an organised structure with the explicit social goal of serving a specific group of people or a wider

community. By contrast, Kerlin (2010) refers to a social enterprise as a business approach to address social issues. This structure is designed to produce goods or services of general interest (Helmsing, 2015) and aims to do so in a stable and continuous (and thus sustainable) way. A social enterprise implies a transfer of social and economic resources to disadvantaged groups (Gray et al, 2003). Social enterprises that emphasise social goals and economic efficiency may help to bring about greater social equity (Bertotti et al, 2012; Nandan and Scott, 2013; Hoefer and Sliva, 2016). However, for social enterprises to be successful, the focus should be on the 'social' aspect and the enterprises need to be dedicated to the 'common good' (Helmsing, 2015; Hoefer and Sliva, 2016).

Gray et al (2003) have called for case study research in social work on the outcomes of social entrepreneurial activities for individuals, groups and communities. Social work is familiar with social enterprise in interventions with communities. Except for task groups with the aim to complete a required task, no research on social enterprises using group work as intervention method in social work was found. This article therefore discusses a case study from South Africa where a group work project assisted in developing and expanding social enterprises with sustainable outcomes. In the South African context with its various social and economic challenges, some of which are outlined below, it is appropriate to use a strengths perspective in a developmental welfare approach. This perspective is also briefly considered below.

South African context

Poverty is common in South Africa and it poses a threat to social and economic development. The historical context of the country, including its colonial and apartheid past, has affected and still has an effect on vulnerable groups and people, especially in rural areas, in informal settlements and in townships (Chibba and Luiz, 2011; Rapatsa, 2015; Ebenezer and Abbyssinia, 2018). After the abolition of apartheid as a policy of racially segregated development and the first fully democratic elections in South Africa in1994, the newly elected African National Congress-led government prioritised the reduction of poverty, but 25 years on, inequities and poverty remain issues of grave concern, as many people in South Africa still suffer from the aftermath of the apartheid system, and the socio-economic consequences for them are dire (Onwuegbuchulam, 2018). Poverty poses a threat to the country's social structures and their cohesion (Govender, 2016).

In countries with weak economies, it may be useful to encourage the development of small enterprises with the aim of addressing issues of poverty (Kerlin, 2010). In a country such as South Africa, which has high rates of unemployment and has been labelled one of the most unequal societies in the world, social enterprises can certainly provide opportunities for poverty reduction (Rambe and Mosweunyane, 2017; Schenck and Blaauw, 2018). The South African public sector cannot and does not provide employment for all the country's citizens (Oluwatayo and Ojo, 2018), even though it does employ social workers to help in assisting in basic needs. Hence, the private sector has to play its part in promoting economic growth, for example, by also employing trained social workers within appropriate organisations to develop strategies to encourage economic growth and

reduce poverty through focused actions to establish and/or expand social enterprises (Chibba and Luiz, 2011; Nandan and Scott, 2013; Brown, 2015). In this context, given the responsibility of social work to pursue social and economic justice, group work provides an ideal platform to promote economic growth, and at the same time to enable group members to experience some improvement in the quality of their lives and give meaning to who they are and what they can do (Doel, 2006; Kirst-Ashman, 2013).

It can be posited that social and economic development are of equal importance – in that case, it is crucial to invest in both human and social capital to support people towards economic activity (Fisher et al, 2014; Rapatsa, 2015; Koloba, 2017; Zastrow, 2017). Social enterprises can promote and sustain socio-economic development to enhance growth and strengthen social cohesion (Borzaga and Galera, 2012). Marginalised groups, who suffer the most, should be helped to realise how they can harness their capabilities, resources and competences to improve the quality of their lives (Govender, 2016; Rambe and Mosweunyane, 2017). The participation of people in their own development is crucial for sustainable social change (Helmsing, 2015).

Worldwide, economic pressures are resulting in shrinking resources (Vungkhanching and Black, 2012). This is also true of South Africa, where economic growth rates have declined over the last few decades. The economic downturn has led to decreased capita per income, increased poverty and dependency on the welfare system (which is under enormous pressure) to meet even basic needs. Inequality contributes to poverty (Khumalo, 2013; Oluwatayo and Ojo, 2018).

Vulnerable groups, especially black women in rural areas, who have least access to economic opportunities and services, are affected severely (Butterfield et al, 2009; Magidimisha and Gordon, 2015; Govender, 2016; Koloba, 2017). Moreover, the southern African region has been greatly affected by the rapid spread of HIV and Aids, especially in the rural areas, where many children have become orphaned and live in poverty, either in child-headed homes or living with their grandparents. Not having enough to make ends meet results in stress and in feelings of inadequacy for many in the community.

Zastrow (2017) points out that community (macro) practice involves working with groups at a meso level. The opportunity to join a group – a setting which offers support, mutual aid and sharing, especially using a strengths perspective – may address some of the challenges associated with poverty, as the case study under discussion demonstrates.

The Strengths Perspective as a theoretical framework

The strengths perspective forms a theoretical basis for establishing and sustaining social enterprises by focusing on the existing strengths of communities, groups and individual members of groups. Instead of focusing on limitations and deficits, the strengths perspective is rooted in theories of empowerment and ecosystems, and is underpinned by humanist philosophy (Pulla, 2012). As a theory of empowerment, the strengths perspective builds on people's resiliency, resources, hopes, capacities and willingness to engage in action pursuing social justice (Zastrow, 2017) by offering opportunities to them to use these existing resources. The strengths perspective is committed to promoting social and economic justice,

and assumes that people have the capacity to develop and become independent and self-reliant, provided that their strengths are identified, enhanced and used (Drake, 2001; Birkland, 2005; Butterfield et al, 2009; Francis et al, 2010; Midgley, 2010; Saleebey, 2013; Segal et al, 2019). This is where social workers can play a role, by helping people to identify, improve and use their own strengths.

Social workers should be knowledgeable about the potential benefit of social enterprises and the process of developing them (Sherraden et al, 2007; Linton, 2013). Service providers such as social workers have an obligation to strengthen the resilience of people who experience economic stress and must explore, recognise and build on the strengths of the people that they work with (Okech et al, 2012).

Working with people from a strengths perspective necessitates promoting positive change to achieve social development and sustainable employment (Weyers, 2011; Okech et al, 2012). In order to harness this perspective, it is important to explore the cognitive, affective, physical and cultural attributes and strengths of individuals (Miley et al, 2009). For example, the approach to drawing on existing cognitive strengths in the case study under discussion included identifying and tapping into the creative capacity of individuals, taking their cultural context into account, and focusing on creating opportunities to use these assets in group work.

The strengths of group functioning and group work skills can be used to involve people who are unemployed and living in poverty in their own development where they can learn skills and form a network of support (Smith et al, 2017). Group work in social work can be the driving force to overcome social and economic challenges,

especially in the third world. Their involvement in enterprises enables people to come together in groups where a particular task focus draws on the specific skills and creativity of individual members (Miley et al, 2009). Such a group can become a mutual support group, as the group bonds and shares while members are practising their skills. Groups involved in the social enterprises clearly demonstrate nurturance, cooperation, and communication that shows respect and investment in others. All these aspects contribute to supporting growth and strengthening relationships from the individual level to the community level (Miley et al, 2009; Goodman et al, 2018).

Growth-oriented groups provide group members with opportunities to develop their capabilities to the fullest, promote the socio-emotional well-being of the group members and focus on self-improvement and the potential of members to live a full life (Toseland and Rivas, 2012). Fostering growth-oriented groups is in line with the strengths perspective, which emphasises that people have inherent strengths that can and need to be developed so that they can live full, independent lives (Malekoff, 2014). Growth-oriented groups have a supportive atmosphere and members can experiment with new behaviours and gain feedback (Jacobs et al, 2016). Thus, growth-oriented groups provide a platform for people to learn about themselves and from others.

The empowerment of people in group work embraces their personal, interpersonal, socio-economic, and political strengths, and their ability to influence and improve their circumstances (Zastrow, 2012; Saleebey, 2013; Goodman et al, 2018). The group work in this case focused on discovering and expanding the resources and tools within and around the group members. Their own strengths

contributed to the positive outcomes of the project. Feedback from the project included that participants had learned from each other and had grown in many aspects of their lives.

Methodology – Case study: Group work and social enterprise

The focus of this article is a group work project with three groups in South Africa where the intervention assisted in expanding a small group work project to grow into a social enterprise for three groups.

In this case study, a social work lecturer and three students (from second and third years) engaged in a voluntary project to facilitate the development and expansion of a specific social enterprise by putting to use their knowledge on addressing social needs as well as their knowledge of entrepreneurship, based on training in a module in business management and entrepreneurship in their undergraduate Social Work programme. As Hoefer and Sliva (2006) point out, social enterprise and entrepreneurship courses for students are necessary on graduate level and undergraduate level. This is especially relevant where the aim is engagement with groups and communities to work toward social and economic development (Brown, 2015; Nandan et al, 2015; Tekula et al, 2015). As discussed above, entrepreneurship is an important driver of the economy, and small business ventures can be created to address poverty and overcome unemployment within the framework of social development (Black et al, 2003; Green et al, 2006). This could potentially help many South Africans who are poverty-stricken especially by focusing on their existing strengths and capacities.

In 2014, the author submitted a proposal to the International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG) to provide the conference bags for the annual symposium to be held in 2015 in North Carolina in the United States. The author knew that a group of older women gathered regularly at a centre for older people in a township in Pretoria and the author recognised an opportunity to develop their group skills as a social enterprise and acted as an activist to promote their goods. The IASWG accepted the proposal and ordered 300 conference bags, along with animal-shaped key ring tags, offering an opportunity to involve three groups of people: a group of older women in a township in Pretoria made the conference bags, a group of female domestic workers and a group of homeless men made padded felt animal keyrings.

The group work project's social goal was creating income for people facing economic challenges, because income may be the most important basis of resilience and strength for individuals or families facing economic pressure (Okech et al, 2012). Micro entrepreneurs often lack the necessary skills and exposure to access and develop a sufficiently sustainable market for their products to allow their enterprises to grow (Paulsen 2012). In this case study, one of the two groups of women already gathered every day, from Monday to Friday, to sew various products – encouraging, supporting and learning from each other – building bonding social capital (Bertotti et al, 2012). However, their market was very limited until volunteers, and later lecturers and students involved in other projects, joined their enterprise as stakeholders.

Discussion of the outcomes

The group work and its outcomes are discussed in this section, looking at each of the three groups involved in the project separately.

The homeless men's group

When the IASWG accepted the proposal for conference bags and padded felt animal keyrings to be made in South Africa, it provided an opportunity to set up a group for homeless men to gain some income and for those who were to facilitate the group to experiment with the combination of a task/growth group. Five homeless men were recruited to work on making padded felt animal keyrings around an organisation rendering services to the homeless in the inner city where the students who participated in the case study were doing their internship. When the group started, these men were begging on the streets and washing cars for an income. In line with Toseland and Rivas's (2012) and Jacobs et al's (2016) suggestions, planning was a crucial step in setting up this group. This step is when facilitators look at prospective members' motivation, expectations and goals for being in the group (Toseland and Rivas, 2012; Jacobs et al, 2016). During interviews to assess potential membership, the men indicated their general frustration with interventions, and stated that they were tired of being in groups to talk about their feelings and behaviours, because it did not help ease hunger, at least, not in the long term. They wanted a group that would enable them to learn a new 'useful' skill that they could use to gain an income in future.

The facilitators formed partnerships with the members and worked with them to sew the animal key ring tags with them, while being engaged in the group. In this group, leader participation contributed to trust and group members' commitment (Jacobs et al, 2016).

In the beginning stages of the group, when the facilitators were training the group members, the members were quiet and rarely spoke. The focus was on making products. As the men began to feel more comfortable with each other and the group environment, they started to talk about topics such as xenophobia (a source of threat to several of the men, some of whom were immigrants), police brutality, job hunting, finding places to sleep, as well as homophobia.

In the middle stage, the members were more confident. One of the members commented: *"… you guys [facilitators] are different, you are not like them [other professionals in the organization] who come and give you the work to do it while they are the boss, you work with us…"*. The group bonded and members knew each other's names; they supported each other in and outside the group. When they bought food, they shared it with each other. The members mastered the art of producing the key rings and created quality products.

The contract indicated that when the commissioned quota of the product was reached, the key rings would be attached to the bags made by the older women to be delivered to IASWG. The group later met again to collect the rewards. After the termination of the group, two members found jobs, and one member started his own

informal business. Another member went back to washing cars, but he considered returning home to Zimbabwe with the income he had generated.

The students responsible for the project with the homeless people reported that they had learned to adapt to the pace of the group members, to motivate members and to persevere under challenging conditions. Their feedback emphasised their own strengths and building their own capacity to initiate similar projects in future.

The domestic worker women's group

The domestic worker women's group developed through word-of-mouth. One woman was asked if she would want to be part of a group that would make animal key rings tags. She asked around among other women, and five more women joined. The women initially bonded through their eagerness to learn a new skill and to earn a small additional income. The group met more than once per week, as they first had to master the cutting and sewing. They encouraged each other to make quality products.

The group displayed elements of support and growth, in line with the argument of Toseland and Rivas (2012). As they sewed, they talked about the challenges of child-rearing and concerns about their children's futures. The women also discussed issues such as challenges experienced in being unemployed or only having a very small income.

Feedback on membership was that the women were very proud to have made the key rings tags, especially because the work was going abroad. After they had

completed the task of making the tags, the group continued to meet twice a week after work to "catch up with one another", thus functioning as a self-help group, a finding similar to that of Jacobs et al (2016). They were eager to teach sewing skills to younger community members in order to encourage entrepreneurship so that they could make a little extra to make ends meet.

The focus remained on the beautiful work that they had done. In the end, this combination of a task group, a support group and even a growth-oriented group was successful. Not only did group members complete the key rings and receive payment for the work, they also gained confidence in their ability to start an entrepreneurial project. The experience of group members' is captured in the following comment:

I am proud to do the animals. Even my eyes were not good, but I manage to finish. I like to talk to the ladies. We talk about our children in Zim. I miss my child every single day. The other lady, her children are also in Zim. It was nice to make friends. I enjoy. Thank you.

The personal growth, support, socialisation and skills training are evident and contribute to the sustainability of the project.

The older women's group

The older women's group met at a centre for older people that serves as a haven for old and frail people in a township in Pretoria. A group of older women already met on weekdays to do sewing. In formalising the partnership between the community and the university, the author arranged a formal meeting with tea and

sandwiches at the university. A contract was drawn up, and the women were excited about the prospect that people in another country would be introduced to their work.

In starting the project, the women formally drew up a division of roles where each one received a task to measure, cut, sew, make the handles for the bags, cut and sew on the South African flag tag, fold the final products and count the number of completed bags. This task-oriented group changed to one with elements of mutual aid, support, growth and socialisation. Discussions during the sewing sessions focused on the members' families and raising children, especially their grandchildren – many of them were grandparents heading a household with young grandchildren, because the parents (the group members' adult offspring) were unemployed, or absent because they were working elsewhere, or had died due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Their challenges with young people and societal changes and how to budget in their economically challenged situations received attention in meeting sessions. Very importantly, they also had opportunities to reminisce about the "good old days", allowing the women to socialise and experience support and growth.

The feedback revealed a sense of humility and gratitude for the way in which the project unfolded, but also one of extreme pride in what was accomplished. One member of the sewing group, showing pride in her own and the group's accomplishments said:

I never believed I could make such beautiful work. I am so happy my work is going to the other countries. The people from the America must come visit me. I will like to take them to my house. My people are very, very poor. The sewing is good to teach to the children. I will show them how to do this.

This finding confirmed Miley et al's (2009) argument that hard work, pride in accomplishments, significant support systems, spirituality, optimism, self-motivation and persistence contribute to the success of the women's groups.

The group continues as a self-help group in line with similar findings by Jacobs et al (2016), Toseland and Rivas (2012) and Zastrow (2012). This group shares elements of education in respect of the new skills they have learned, support because they share numerous factors, and socialisation while sewing and talking.

The value of the group work project for a social enterprise

Feedback from recipients of the bags included comments such as *"Thank you for your work and talent. My bag will be cherished".* Another symposium attendee commented:

> *The conference bags are gorgeous. I bought two more before I knew the story about how they were made. Now that I know the story, I am overwhelmed with emotion! It gives me great pleasure to know that I bought bags whose proceeds will go back to phenomenal women.*

The 300 bags that symposium attendees received in North Carolina at the IASWG symposium sparked considerable interest. For example, a fair-trade store in Germany ordered a batch of 200 bags in 2016, which the author delivered at the 2016 IASWG symposium in New York. The following year, in 2017, an organisation in the Netherlands ordered 100 bags in a project to support women in small social enterprises. Refugee families and social entrepreneurs make the stuffed animal key rings and every new order adds to their sense of accomplishment.

In considering the value of the social enterprise as discussed above, its contribution to the participants related to social outcomes and income generation, as predicted by Brower (2011) and Nandan et al (2015). Group members reported that they felt they received support from fellow group members and the facilitators. They experienced growth in expanding their skills in making the goods and on a personal level. While making the goods, they also experienced a growing sense of self-appreciation and self-esteem, and confidence in their ability to produce quality products that could be sold internationally. The socialisation in the daily or weekly sessions made them feel accepted and recognised, which had a distinct effect on their sense of worth and dignity. The recognition they received from their partners, the facilitators and the recipients of the goods made them feel respected and important.

Conclusions and recommendations for successful implementation of group work for developing social enterprises

It is widely agreed that social work should play a role in using social enterprises to address societal problems, because it has the capacity to facilitate and enable social and economic development through intervention projects (Nandan et al, 2015). Gray et al (2003) and Zastrow (2017) claim that indisputably social work must focus on economic development and aim to reduce poverty. Admittedly, a small-scale social enterprise cannot hope to eliminate poverty (Rambe and Mosweunyane, 2017), but it can open up pathways out of poverty by providing some income for members of the community to address several of the challenges of poverty (Magidimisha and Gordon, 2015). A multi-stakeholder approach is recommended as an anti-poverty strategy (Chibba and Luiz, 2011; Nandan and Scott, 2013), because

resources, expertise and opportunities in a multi-stakeholder context can assist in establishing social enterprises. Micro entrepreneurs, as in the case study project, do not necessarily have the resources and exposure that larger organizations can offer, as they still need support to enable them to grow to a point where they can be sustainable.

For social enterprises to be successful and sustainable, Nandan and Scott (2013) recommend that facilitators have knowledge of and be trained in social entrepreneurship. To distinguish between charitable engagement and sustainable engagement with long-term sustainability, facilitators require specialised skills and a sound theoretical point of departure. In the case study, the students as group facilitators had training in a module in business management and entrepreneurship in their undergraduate Social Work programme, which assisted them in successfully training and managing the three groups with a social enterprise as outcome. Following a strength perspective proved effective in making the most of the existing social capital in these community groups to bring about social and economic growth.

The case study discussed above suggests that group work skills and intervention formed a bridge to community practice. The group work assisted the members to achieve development at the social and economic levels. The group members' shared pride in their products, their bonding and sense of accomplishment provided the glue to continue with the social enterprise in a sustainable way. Traditionally, social service delivery was limited to casework (work with individuals and families), but today, bridging the individual, group and community divide in rendering services is an important aspect to consider if social work is to contribute to

social and economic development. Based on the evidence of the case study, where group work was used as an intervention method, this article argues that social workers do indeed have an opportunity at all levels of intervention to assist in both social and economic development.

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