

book

reviews

Social development: the developmental perspective in social welfare

by James Midgley

1995, Sage Publications, London

As Midgley points out in his introduction, this is the first text to deal specifically with social development. Although the term has been part of our vocabulary for some decades now, it has been little understood, and is often no more than a counter to the economic development emphasis of the post-World War II years.

Midgley presents a clear and logical view of social development. He sees it as transcending the residualist and institutional approaches 'by linking social welfare directly to economic development policies and programmes' (p 1). His definition of social development is 'a process of planned social change designed to promote the well-being of the population as a whole in conjunction with a dynamic process of economic development' (p 25). To Midgley, social development is inextricably linked to economic development, involving an interventionist approach to promote the social welfare of all peoples within the specific settings where they live and work.

An important strength of Midgley's book is his placing of the concept of social development in several contexts. Most importantly, he explores alternative definitions of social development, which helps the reader to grasp the concept. He provides also a detailed presentation of the historical context of theories of social change and intervention, going back to Greek and Roman writers. Central to this historical presentation is the evolution

of the welfare state and its promotion through colonialism.

Parallel to this historical analysis is a useful discussion of the theoretical debates out of which social development emerged. Once again, this enables Midgley to deepen our understanding of the concept of social development, and to present his theory of social development as a process involving preconditions and goals.

In the final chapters of the book, Midgley moves to the question of achieving social development. He devotes a chapter to strategies for pursuing social development, which are specific and presented clearly with plenty of references to specific situations. His basic framework for this is social development by individuals, communities and governments. This presentation evaluates some of the strategies utilised in the past while emphasising those important to the future.

The final chapter of the book returns to Midgley's model of social development, highlighting its essential elements within the practice context. This presents very clearly a very specific approach to social development with which not all readers will agree. Describing his approach as 'the institutional perspective', which 'seeks to mobilize diverse social institutions including the market, community and state to promote people's welfare' (p 139), Midgley presents what many readers will see as a relatively conservative and

pragmatic approach to social development. It suggests a consensus or eclectic approach by drawing the statist, market-based and communitarian emphases into the one pluralistic ('managed pluralism') approach.

There is nothing radical or particularly challenging in Midgley's approach, unless it be the challenge of managing the envisioned process. There is a role in social development for all sectors, working at all levels of society, and encompassing the skills of all disciplines. Especially, however, there is a role for government in carrying out the all-important role of 'facilitating, coordinating and directing the efforts of diverse groups' (p 175).

Not all will accept Midgley's approach. However, the text makes a very valuable contribution to the subject by exploring thoroughly, and in an eminently readable text, the various streams of thought and policy which have been social development over the centuries. Whatever one's orientation, this text should be essential reading, reflecting as it does decades of work on this topic by a highly competent and committed contributor to the challenge of social development. ✨

Reviewed by:

David Cox
Graduate School of Social Work
La Trobe University.