

# Structural Inequalities in Namibia and South Africa: A Critical Social Work Perspective

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## Abstract

Namibia and South Africa share land and maritime borders and the interrelated structural challenges of poverty and socio-economic inequalities amidst progressive economic growth that are rooted in their apartheid past and contemporary economic development trajectories. Such inequalities are defined along racial, class, gender and other social locations that either grant privilege, power and access to socio-economic opportunities or result in marginalisation, oppression and resource deprivation. The rationale for this article is linked to the historic call for social work to intensify efforts in promoting social and economic equality. Despite Namibia and South Africa's geographical proximity and their intertwined histories, there is a dearth of social work studies that offer a comparative critical social work perspective on structural inequalities in these former apartheid strongholds. While social work should actively engage in contesting the structural contradictions of poverty and inequalities amidst abundant resources, the reality is often that of the uncritical acceptance of existing socio-political inequalities, such that the profession's enunciated commitment to social justice becomes perimetric. Thus, the article argues for the inclusion of critical social work approaches in social work education and practice against a backdrop of ideological divides, political trends and contextual factors that limit social workers' critical and structural level engagement.

**Keywords:** structural inequalities; critical social work; developmental social work; social justice; Namibia; South Africa



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## Introduction

Namibia and South Africa are geographically and ethnologically distinct countries that share borders, trade relations, and a similar history of political and socio-economic disenfranchisement, having been simultaneously governed by the former South African apartheid regime until the early 1990s. Their colonial and apartheid histories continue “to deeply [impact and] affect ... [the] present and future practices” (Bozalek and Hölscher 2022, 1) of social work therein. Several decades since the end of apartheid, the socio-economic conditions of many of their citizens remain static or have even deteriorated and are mismatched with their countries’ levels of economic development (Chiwara and Lombard 2022; Lombard and Twikirize 2014). Concomitantly, income and wealth are concentrated amongst a few citizens by virtue of their race, class, gender or political affiliation (Sulla, Zikhali and Cuevas 2022), thereby attesting to how people’s social location can either grant privilege, power and access to a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising capabilities or result in marginalisation, oppression and resource deprivation (DuBois and Miley 2019; Young 2007). Social work in these countries should actively engage in contesting the structural contradictions of poverty and inequalities amidst abundant resources. The reality, however, is often that of the “uncritical acceptance of existing sociopolitical inequities ... [coupled by] uninterrogated assumption[s]” (Alston 2013, 226) of the way things are. In this way, the profession’s enunciated commitment to social justice becomes peripheral.

The rationale for this article is linked to the historic call for social work to intensify efforts in promoting social and economic equality against a backdrop of widening structural inequalities (IFSW, IASSW and ICSW 2012). The article is informed by my doctoral study (Chiwara 2019). My position is that of a Zimbabwean citizen whose long-term studying and dual residence in Namibia and South Africa have exposed me to the social welfare policy, social work education, and practice contexts in the countries under study.

The article contributes to critical social work scholarship by exploring the contradictions in social, political and economic arrangements in Namibia (Chiwara and Lombard 2022), with an extended focus on South Africa, where a wide body of critical social work writings already exist (Bozalek and Hölscher 2022; Mpfu 2021; Sewpaul and Kreitzer 2021; Shokane and Masoga 2019). Despite Namibia and South Africa’s geographical proximity and intertwined histories, no previous social work studies have offered a comparative critical social work perspective on structural inequalities in these former apartheid strongholds. Hence, the justification for the article.

The article is structured as follows. Brief country contexts of Namibia and South Africa are presented in view of stimulating critical discussions on the structural inequalities therein. Following this, an attempt is made to juxtapose the imperative to harmonise social and economic development through a social development paradigm against the global trend towards neoliberal capitalism. Thereafter, critical social work is presented

as an appropriate practice approach that social workers in Namibia and South Africa can utilise in confronting structural inequalities. This is followed by a discussion that embeds critical social work within developmental social work practice, a conclusion, and recommendations for structural change.

## The Country Contexts that Underpinned the Study

Historically, South Africa is Namibia's biggest trading partner, with Namibia's currency and economy intrinsically tied to that of South Africa (NSA 2020). Among other vast natural endowments, Namibia is the world's largest producer of marine diamonds (Krause-Jackson 2019). Its population of 3.02 million people (NSA 2024) is significantly smaller than South Africa's (60.6 million people) (Stats SA 2022). Both countries are classified as upper middle-income nations with gross national incomes that fall within the range of US\$4 046 and US\$12 535 per capita (World Bank 2023a). Despite their notable economic strides, the enduring contradiction is that economic development has not significantly yielded better socio-economic outcomes for many of their citizens (Taylor 2018). Based on the World Bank's (2023a) global database of Gini coefficients, South Africa is the most unequal country in the world, with Namibia following closely in second place.

Evidently, poverty and inequality are persistently manifest despite the countries' levels of economic development, constitutional provisions (Republic of Namibia 1990; RSA 1996) and national development plans (Republic of Namibia 2004b; RSA 2012) that envision progressively realising social and economic rights for all. These challenges remain structurally entrenched and racially stratified with women being overrepresented among the poor, a phenomenon that attests to the feminisation of poverty. Similarly, more than half of the children in Namibia (51.3%) and South Africa (62.1%) are multidimensionally poor and suffer manifold deprivations in education, nutrition, health, housing, water and sanitation (NSA 2021; Stats SA 2020).

The triple impacts of environmental disasters, the Covid-19 pandemic and the knock-on effects of the Russia-Ukraine war have negatively impacted on socio-economic progress and exacerbated food insecurity in both countries (Petersen 2023; World Bank 2023b). The "load shedding" (i.e. power cuts) that is a recurrent feature in South Africa poses negative ripple effects on both countries' economies, considering Namibia's historical dependence on South Africa's economy (Krause-Jackson 2019). Despite Namibia not implementing load shedding, it is faced with deep-seated energy inequities where only 50% of its urban population and 20% of its rural population have access to electricity (Brandt 2022).

Social welfare and social work in Namibia and South Africa share a similarly contentious history that is interwoven with colonisation and apartheid (Bozalek and Hölscher 2022; Kamwanyah, Freeman and Rose-Junius 2021). Since the attainment of Namibia's independence in 1990 and South Africa's democracy in 1994, the countries

have attempted – albeit with varying levels of success – to transform their social welfare systems, social work organisational structures, and processes to align with a developmental social welfare and social work approach. South Africa has made commendable strides in this regard and is one of the few countries in Africa with a social welfare policy framework (RSA 1997) and a social work legal framework (RSA 1978). Social welfare systems encompass policies, legislations, programmes, projects and organisational structures that provide for the delivery of social welfare services (Taylor 2018). On their part, social welfare policies serve as the foundation of social welfare programmes and services. They improve access to resources, and social and economic opportunities and can be leveraged as conduits for macro-level change (DuBois and Miley 2019).

However, while Namibia has a social work legal framework (Republic of Namibia 2004a), it lacks a social welfare policy framework (Chiwara and Lombard 2017). Notwithstanding this, both countries implement state sponsored social welfare services and social protection provisions that predate the attainment of their respective democracies. The difference being that South Africa’s social welfare system has transformed to embrace developmental social welfare policies and approaches that interrelate social and economic goals, and are grounded in social welfare pluralism, people participation, bridging the micro-macro divide and human rights-based practice (Lombard 2019). Inversely, the social welfare system in Namibia follows a residual path, is casework-oriented and inimical to the contextual realities of poverty and structural inequalities that require macro-level practice (Kamwanyah, Freeman and Rose-Junius 2021; UNICEF 2018).

The state-sponsored social protection provisions in both countries include disability grants, child support grants, war veterans’ grants, and old age pensions (Petersen 2023; RSA 2023). While these services play a crucial income redistribution role, their impact on poverty eradication is limited due to them being poorly targeted and pegged below national poverty lines (Hochfeld and Plagerson 2017; Petersen 2023). It is therefore important that the countries revise their social grant provisions in light of rising costs of living so as to effectively mitigate poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion (ILO 2012).

Social workers and social auxiliary workers constitute the social services professions in Namibia, which has one social work training institution, 533 registered social workers, and one social auxiliary worker (HPCNA 2022). While the training and practice of social auxiliary workers is provided for in Namibia, the country has no institutions that currently train this professional cadre (Chiwara and Lombard 2017). Following Namibia’s independence in 1990, its social welfare services mandate was consolidated under the Ministry of Health and Social Services (MoHSS) but was soon shared among four other ministries (Masabane and Wiman 2007), namely: the Ministry of Gender Equality, Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare; the Ministry of Sport, Youth and National Service; the Ministry of Defence and Veterans Affairs; and the Ministry of

Home Affairs, Immigration, Safety and Security. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF 2017) reports that the split in Namibia’s social welfare mandate resulted in the fragmentation and duplication of services with significant overlap in the ministries’ functions. In view of increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of Namibia’s social welfare system, UNICEF recommends assigning one ministry to oversee the social welfare mandate.

The general oversight for the social welfare mandate in South Africa is held by the Department of Social Development. In addition, there are 18 institutions that train social workers in South Africa (SACSSP 2023) which has 38 443 registered social workers and 12 716 social auxiliary workers (SACSSP 2023). Child and youth care workers and auxiliary child and youth care workers also constitute the social service professions in South Africa. Notwithstanding this, a critical shortage of social workers remains an enduring challenge in both countries (Chiwara and Lombard 2022; David 2021), with the irony being that many qualified social workers remain unemployed due to funding constraints (Namibian Press Agency 2019; Opperman 2022). This reality can be better explained by examining the contrasting pursuit of social development and neoliberal ideals in both countries.

### Critical Polarities of Social Development and Neoliberalism

Social work in both Namibia and South Africa is practised within a social welfare and macro-economic environment that is characterised and shaped by the contending ideologies of social development and neoliberalism (Chiwara and Lombard 2022; Patel 2015). In 2012, the tripartite alliance that represents social work practitioners, educators and social service organisations launched the *Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development: Commitment to Action [Global Agenda]*. In so doing, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), and International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) (2012) enunciates social work’s commitment to social development. Its sequel, the *2020 to 2030 Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development Framework: Co-Building Inclusive Social Transformation* (IFSW, IASSW and ICSW 2020), reinforces social work’s commitment to co-building inclusive social transformation through a social development frame of reference. As an approach to development, social development acknowledges that social welfare goals such as the eradication of poverty and inequalities can only be addressed if social and economic development are harmonised (Midgley 2014). Social development is furthermore framed within social work’s egalitarian conceptualisations of social justice as fairness and equal access to societal resources and opportunities (DuBois and Miley 2019; Young 2007). Social development “seeks to enable poorer and more oppressed groups of people ... to share in the benefits of economic development” (Payne 2014, 217). It is informed by the belief that economic development policies should be people centred and must address socio-economic disparities (Midgley 2017). It contributes to “economic development through social investments in social programmes that enhance people’s welfare through their

participation in the productive economy and the achievement of social inclusion” (Patel 2015, 125).

A definition of social development by Midgley (2014, 13) perceives it as “a process of planned social change designed to promote the well-being of the population as a whole within ... a dynamic multifaceted development process”. This definition implies that social development is committed to universalism and inclusiveness, which are all important in view of aiming for sustainable development while leaving no-one behind in the development process (UN 2015). The notion of planned social change suggests that social development is an outcome of “policymaking and the implementation of targeted programmes and projects” (Midgley 2017, 163).

South Africa made firm its commitment to a social development informed developmental social welfare system through its adoption of the *White Paper for Social Welfare* (RSA 1997). Thus, developmental social work emerged as a contextually relevant approach to social work that is aimed at addressing historic and emergent social welfare challenges. Namibia, through the MoHSS, similarly embarked on formulating a social welfare policy framework with plans and operations aligned towards a developmental social welfare approach by 1999 (MoHSS 2010; Republic of Namibia 2014). However, a formal approval of the draft developmental social welfare policy was never achieved due to the lack of high-level political support (Masabane and Wiman 2007). The MoHSS has from a ministerial point of view attempted to revive this policy process (Republic of Namibia 2014) but none of its attempts have translated into a social welfare policy framework for the country. Namibia’s failed attempts in this regard attest to the fact that “social policy is also politics ... the ... [adoption] of government policies can only be ensured if there is high-level political backing” (Masabane and Wiman 2007, 52).

In stark contrast to the IFSW, IASSW and ICSW (2012) and South Africa’s enunciated commitment to social development is the influential neoliberal development paradigm that has gained traction in many countries including Namibia and South Africa. As neoliberalism is an antithesis to social development, the two are noted to create social welfare tensions, dilemmas and challenges (Hölscher 2008). Having won protracted struggles against apartheid, the founding election manifestos of the governing South-West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO) and the African National Congress (ANC) respectively committed to a socialist political, economic and welfare ideology (Gray 2006; Likela 2021). Socialism denotes “a political and economic theory of social organisation which ... [states] that the means of production, distribution, and exchange should be owned or regulated by the community as a whole” (Oxford Languages 2023). In so doing, the governing political parties acknowledged the critical role that social welfare could play in redistributing wealth in their politically emancipated countries.

Notwithstanding this, the parties eventually detracted from their socialist ideals choosing rather to entrench their countries’ constitutions and macro-economic policy

frameworks in neoliberal capitalism (Francis and Webster 2019; Iikela 2021). The late Namibian and SWAPO president, Dr Hage G. Geingob, submitted that “adopting socialism as ... a political and economic ideology was a mistake on the part of the ruling party ... because it has proven troublesome to implement” (Iikela 2021, 1). Furthermore, “SWAPO’s ideology of socialism could never be a reality in Namibia, because it clashes with the Constitution” (Shanghala as quoted in an interview with Iikela 2021). The countries’ radical policy shift from socialism to neoliberalism can be attributed to internal factors and to external pressures imposed by global market forces and international trade agreements (Taylor 2018).

As a political and economic ideology, neoliberalism is underscored by capitalism. It envisions countries becoming part of an integrated system that is linked to and influenced by global market mechanisms, international trade agreements, and transnational corporate influences. It furthermore prescribes a universal set of rules, norms and procedures for the trade of goods and services (Taylor 2018). Neoliberalism prioritises economic growth at the expense of equity, gender equality, decent work, and sustainability (Patel 2015). It also aligns with libertarian notions of justice that valorise individual rights and liberties (DuBois and Miley 2019). It is furthermore associated with the normalisation of greed, overconsumption and the pursuit of financial profits at the expense of the wellbeing of people and the planet (Chiwara 2019). The widely publicised Fishrot and State Capture scandals in Namibia and South Africa, respectively, which involved massive bribery, tax evasion and the plundering of state resources by high-ranking ruling party officials and those connected to them are testimony to the pervasive forms of corruption associated with greed driven development (Coetzee 2021; Hartwig 2023). They furthermore attest to how “processes of exploitation and expropriation are integral to the [neoliberal] capitalist system” (Bozalek and Hölscher 2022, 5).

Taylor (2018) observes that inadequate and, at times, corrupt systems of governance coupled with ineffective social policies and neoliberal economic globalisation undermine the resilience and coping abilities of individuals, households and societies. Rather than yielding dual social and economic dividends, neoliberalism has resulted in unsustainable models of development, unequal power dynamics, and the unequal distribution of resources that exacerbate structural inequalities and affect low-income groups the most (Dominelli 2014; Gray and Webb 2014). To effectively alter the status quo of poverty and structural inequalities, social work in Namibia and South Africa must adopt those approaches that will enable it to connect the micro-level experiences of service users with macro-level ideologies, policies, practices and power dynamics (DuBois and Miley 2019; Netting et al. 2017), of which critical social work is but one contextually relevant example.

## Critical Social Work

Dealing with complex structural, political and socio-economic challenges demands that social workers adopt multiple approaches at multi-systemic levels (Sewpaul and Kreitzer 2021). As grounded in the applied and emancipatory critical theory (Briskman, Pease and Allan 2020), critical social work is an appropriate approach through which social workers can develop the critical consciousness to analyse and contest structural inequalities. As coined by Paulo Freire, critical consciousness denotes a level of insight at which social workers start recognising poverty and inequality as structural issues rather than the individual failings of service users (Ledwith 2020). It is through critical consciousness that social workers begin to interlink service users' material conditions and experiences with dominant ideologies and societal arrangements (Briskman, Pease and Allan 2020). Critical consciousness starts with social workers acknowledging the reality of oppression that is faced by vulnerable and marginalised societal groups; critically questioning structural inequities and unequal socio-economic and political arrangements; followed by initiating deliberate action to alter the status quo (DuBois and Miley 2019).

Critical social workers are committed to emancipatory forms of practice that address oppression, and transform the personal, interpersonal, socio-economic and political conditions, and structures that perpetuate exploitation and powerlessness (Healy 2012). As structural inequalities cut across age, gender, class, race and socio-economic status and have temporal and spatial dimensions, it follows that there are several strands of critical social work. These include structural, radical, feminist, anti-oppressive and post-structural social work (Healy 2012; Mpofu 2021). Regardless of the strand, the synergy between them is the need for critical, post-colonial theorising, revolutionary, structural and emancipatory approaches to social work (Sewpaul and Kreitzer 2021) that contribute to social justice. This assertion may appear as seemingly “unremarkable insofar as social justice is ... a core value of social work” (Healy 2012, 192). Evidently, some question the “need to articulate a ‘critical’ [form of] social work” considering that “all social work [is supposedly] ‘critical’ in the sense of [it] being committed to social as well as individual transformation” (Briskman, Pease and Allan 2020, 3). However, the idea of social work being an inherently radical profession has become elusive in light of political trends and contextual factors that limit social workers' critical engagement (Briskman, Pease and Allan 2020). Evidently, issues of social and economic (in)justice and structural inequalities are noted to occupy a marginal space in some social work contexts (Chiwara and Lombard 2022; Smith 2014). Hence, social work's self-image as a profession that is inherently committed to social justice is increasingly being questioned (Bozalek and Hölscher 2022).

## Discussion

As social work is contextually determined, social work theory, education, research, policy and practice must be situated within the political and socio-economic contexts in

which they are practised (Briskman, Pease and Allan 2020; Sewpaul and Kreitzer 2021). Namibia and South Africa's shared history of apartheid and the enduring realities of poverty and structural inequalities should significantly influence the social work agenda therein such that it gravitates towards macro-level structural change. Developmental social work is the enunciated approach to social work in South Africa (Patel 2015) and is noted as a preferable approach to social work in Namibia (Ananias and Lightfoot 2014). As a progressive approach to social work, developmental social work draws on a range of emancipatory, decolonial, people-centred, strengths-based and anti-discriminatory theories and practice frameworks (Van Breda 2019). Critical social work is consonant with the key features of developmental social work. It enables social workers to reframe their interventions such that they contribute to structural change and the abolishment of practices that are antithetical to social justice (Briskman, Pease and Allan 2020).

In this era of globalisation, social work and social welfare are increasingly shaped by political, socio-economic and cultural milieux at regional and global levels. This implies that social workers must engage on a continuum from direct work with individuals to political level interventions and challenge the personal-political, micro- and macro-level dichotomies (Sewpaul and Kreitzer 2021). This extends to linking local issues with global trends (Lombard 2019) where social work must strive to be contextually relevant while transcending a limited focus on the domestic affairs within social workers' national boundaries. Interrelating local and global issues is critically important seeing that poverty and structural inequalities are often rooted in global interdependencies, policies and practices. This also necessitates an examination of the global factors that contribute to structural injustices including those that can be leveraged for solutions to local challenges (Cox and Pawar 2013). This argument bears salience in an increasingly globalising and "interdependent world, where solutions for the particular must be sought in the universal, and where local solutions feed into global discourses and practices" (Sewpaul and Kreitzer 2021, 277).

Social work in the countries under study is practised in contexts where political leaders have adopted policy enunciated neoliberal market positions. The pursuit of neoliberalism in these countries has profound consequences for social service users and influence the approaches that social workers follow in their practice (Harms Smith 2015). Neoliberalism calls for the implementation of a new public management system that may potentially reduce social work to administrative functions while diminishing its social transformation role (Gray and Webb 2014). Within the new public management system, social work finds itself assuming system stabilising roles that relegate it to fulfilling narrowly defined key performance indicators with little or no impact on systemic change and development (Gray and Webb 2014).

Neoliberalism also implies residual, short-term and individually targeted services that are reminiscent of the way social welfare services were structured during apartheid (Patel 2015). This requires social workers to understand and question pervasive

“ideologies in relation to the market economy and minimalist government intervention when these are among the tenets that fail to redress inequality” (Briskman, Pease and Allan 2020, 7). The neoliberal development paradigm also dictates the way in which governments view and apportion resources for social welfare.

The recent decision by the South African Department of Social Development to cut funding for non-profit organisations is but one example. In this regard, the Gauteng Department of Social Development made a drastic R223 million cut to its 2024/25 social welfare services budget (Pongweni and Sikhakhane 2024). This reality has major implications for poverty alleviation and macro-level interventions that require adequate funding for social welfare programmes. It is furthermore testament to how political power “produces and reproduces the conditions that facilitate growing inequality” (Francis and Webster 2019, 789). From a critical social work perspective, power, be it personal, interpersonal or the socio-political power wielded by markets or nations, becomes an important issue for social work to critically reflect on and contest as it works for social justice (DuBois and Miley 2019). Without social justice, the economic development and political stability that Namibia and South Africa have worked so hard to realise risk being endangered (Wiman, Voipio and Ylönen 2007).

As opposed to situating injustices in extraneous circumstances, critical social workers acknowledge that social workers cannot risk becoming complicit in committing structural injustices (Mpofu 2021), while working and “acting ... within given institutional rules and accepted norms” (Young 2007, 170). Thus, a critical social work approach provides the critical consciousness that helps to guard against reinforcing the very same oppressive power dynamics that oppress and marginalise service users (Gray and Webb 2014). Concomitantly, they acknowledge social work’s capacity to contribute to a more inclusive, equitable, and just society (Sewpaul and Kreitzer 2021). Critical social work’s contribution to social transformation is linked to reflecting upon how dominant ideologies and societal institutions impact on people’s lives and challenging the legitimacy and development of oppressive institutions and practices (Briskman, Pease and Allan 2020).

The absence of a social welfare policy framework in Namibia poses critical challenges as it implies the lack of a rallying cry for the social work profession such that practice risks uncritically adopting philosophies that mirror the historic individualistic interventions that are ill-suited to the contextual realities of poverty and structural inequalities (Van Breda 2019). Within the context of a dislocation of theory from practice, social workers put themselves in danger of implicitly acting in support of the very status quo that churns out structural inequalities (Ledwith 2020). Thus, an ongoing critical review of existing social work theoretical and practice frameworks against changing times and new research findings is recommended. This is opposed to the uncritical acceptance of the concepts, beliefs, values and assumptions that historically underpin social work (Sewpaul and Kreitzer 2021). The themes of the *Global Agenda* (IFSW, IASSW and ICSW 2012; 2020) and the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable*

*Development* (UN 2015) provide a good entry point to guide social work in re-examining its theory, education and practice.

The challenge for Namibia is to develop and adopt a social welfare system that is rich in contextual interpretation. However, adopting a social welfare policy framework that is grounded in human rights and particularly in social and economic rights is not a universal solution to any country's social welfare challenges (Chiwara and Lombard 2017). This is true for South Africa where the fulfilment of social and economic rights is not a given but is dependent on the availability of resources (RSA 1996). Blakemore and Griggs (2007) ascertain that the economic costs associated with the implementation of social welfare policies and the unavailability of public funds, constrain the capability of governments in implementing well-crafted policies. Similarly, "those accorded status and power make overriding decisions that define which needs are pressing and how they will be addressed" (DuBois and Miley 2019, 18). Thus, constitutional clauses that cite the resource constraints associated with the fulfilment of socio-economic rights can be exploited to serve as a smokescreen for lack of political will on the part of duty bearers who have the power to determine how a country's resources should be expended. Thus, a role is identified for social work in holding duty bearers accountable for respecting, promoting, and upholding socio-economic rights so that all people can enjoy an existence worthy of human dignity.

## Conclusion

The existing structural inequalities in Namibia and South Africa are rooted in the harsh legacies of their colonial and post-colonial white rule but are perpetuated by the dominance of a neoliberal economic agenda. Thus, the article has attempted to highlight the interrelated structural challenges of poverty and socio-economic inequalities in Namibia and South Africa. While political freedom is an evident reality, it is freedom from poverty and structural inequalities which sums up the collective aspirations of these countries' citizens.

Critical social work is an appropriate practice approach for use in contexts like Namibia and South Africa that are characterised by structural inequalities. Its utility lies in how it positions social work as an active key player in confronting structural injustices; advocating for the interests of those left behind; and taking action to challenge the unjust power dynamics that are associated with socio-economic and political arrangements (Dubois and Miley 2019). Social workers in Namibia and South Africa should be critically cognisant of the contending polarities of social development and neoliberalism and how they influence social welfare policy, social work education and practice in their countries. Within an increasingly interconnected world, social workers have a critical role to play in confronting the consequences of the new world order with an integrated emphasis on social, economic, and environmental concerns (Briskman, Pease and Allan 2020).

It is against this background that the article recommends the adoption of social work training programmes and standards of practice that encompass critical social work, the interlinkages between global and local issues as well as structural inequalities in view of implementing structural interventions. Furthermore, social workers should actively challenge the infiltration of neoliberal capitalism in policy decisions and their associated socio-economic injustices (Sewpaul and Kreitzer 2021).

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