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**COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITY FOR SOCIAL WELFARE: A BENEFICIAL OR  
NEGATIVE SHIFT FOR COMMUNITIES FOR COMMUNITIES?**

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**ABSTRACT**

The adoption of neo-liberalism by Western governments has led to a transfer of responsibility for social welfare from the state to individuals and their communities. In this paper, I investigate the impact on communities of this shift towards increased self-government by exploring both the benefits and challenges posed by downloading social welfare to the community level. The paper highlights the many opportunities now available for communities to finally gain control of their welfare affairs. It also discusses how community self government forces people to become responsible for their own social welfare without being able to access the necessary resources required to actualize their welfare delivery plans. As such, I argue that people's entitlements to social welfare are being eroded under the current system. It has been my experience that communities do not remain inactive under such conditions. Thus, in the final section of the paper I claim several opportunities are still available for progressive community capacity building, and initiate a discussion on how resistance actions can be taken so that communities begin to direct welfare delivery in a manner conducive to their needs and wants.

## **Introduction**

The enhancement of the breadth and depth of globalization has been accompanied by an adoption of neo-liberal economic and political policies by governments. Neo-liberalism favours social relations where the state's sole job is to maintain law and order, removing its influence in the provision of social welfare. This return to "market liberalism" marks a dramatic shift away from previous welfare systems within western countries possessing a welfare state, which attempted to provide social safety nets for people so that the negative effects of capitalism were relatively managed. Although it failed to adequately address the needs and experiences of all marginalized populations, the previous welfare systems did carry more universal and unified delivery of welfare than the system which is currently in existence. According to neo-liberal ideology, individuals must arrange themselves and their communities to find solutions to the dissolving welfare state. Thus, the voluntary sector, rather than the state, now plays a primary role in the development of social and economic rights for people. As such, neo-liberalism promotes a form of community government whereby communities become responsible for their individual and national wellbeing (Basok and Ilcan, 2004). These ideas are elaborated later during "A Brief Discussion of How Communities Came to be Responsible for Welfare."

The shift to community self-government, caused by social welfare retrenchment and the downloading of responsibility for welfare delivery by the state under neo-liberalism, invokes varying responses regarding its benefits and limitations. Several authors note that this shift poses many opportunities for communities to finally gain control of their welfare affairs, however, other authors argue that community self government forces people to become responsible for their own social welfare without being able to access the necessary resources required to actualize their welfare delivery plans. As such, people's entitlements to social welfare are being eroded. It is important to explore the varying research perspectives on community self government in order to better understand how different people and populations have different access to social welfare access amid the current context of globalization. Additionally, this topic is important to explore so that we better understand what opportunities are available for progressive community capacity building so that we can shift the balance of power in order that communities can gain access and control of social welfare.

Therefore, the central question guiding this essay is: "What is the impact on communities of the shift to increased self-government, which is caused by social welfare retrenchment and the downloading of responsibility for welfare delivery by states under neo-liberalism?" In order to answer this question, I will first explore the benefits and challenges posed by downloading social welfare to the community level. I will then use available literature to support the claim that resistance actions can be taken so that communities begin to direct welfare delivery in a manner conducive to their needs and wants.

## **Discussion of Main Concepts**

Before engaging in the main discussions of this paper, it is important that I define the main concepts referred to throughout the essay. For the purposes of this paper,

globalization is broadly defined as “a process of global integration in which diverse peoples, economies, cultures, and political processes are increasingly subjected to international influences by a variety of actors including governments, international organizations, business, labour and civil society” (Gunter & van der Hoeven, 2004, p7). The experience of globalization is essentially different from earlier forms of international exchange in that these current processes are more complex, intense and volatile than their predecessors. Accompanying the current forms of economic globalization is the widespread adoption of neo-liberal policies. Brodie (1999) explains that neo-liberalism “emphasizes the primacy of the capitalist market as the steering force in society, deregulation of the economy, and displacement of public goods into the market” (p.38). Regarding social welfare, neo-liberalism discourages social programs and government support for welfare, encouraging people to purchase care from private providers, or their families and communities. The last concept requires some explanation is my understanding of community. Craig (2007) argues that individuals come together as a community because they occupy a defined physical space, they share a similar identity, or they are mobilized around common social issues. Throughout this paper, I will refer to community in all its varying forms and reasons for formulation, as it is within all three types of communities that shifts to neo-liberalism have made people responsible for their welfare access and delivery.

#### **A Brief Discussion of How Communities Come to be Responsible for Welfare**

As previously mentioned, there is increasingly a shift towards community self-government and responsibility for welfare delivery accompanying neo-liberal globalization. While the scope of this paper does not permit a full delineation of the impact of neo-liberalism on social welfare provision, some basic tenets of these processes must be noted so that the following discussion of the benefits and limitations of community responsibility for welfare is contextualized. Shifts to community government result from the modification of former welfare states’ roles. In the contemporary global economy, an increasing proportion of power has moved beyond the control of governments into the hands of trans-national corporations (Garrett, 2002). This occurs as governments attempt to “court” corporations by privatizing, deregulating, decentralizing, and downsizing public services. In doing so, they relinquish their power to solve or address social problems (Rice & Prince, 2000). For example, the switch to the Canadian Health and Social Transfer from the Canadian Assistance Plan in 1995 resulted in “the federal government abdicating its former role of building national standards into post secondary education, healthcare and social assistance” (Brodie, 1999, p.37). While attempting to disinvest themselves of the responsibility to meet people’s social and economic needs, states have engaged individuals, private enterprises, and communities to recreate institutions of social support. These initiatives are couched in language of “enhancing social justice”, and „developing community capacity and neighbourhood renewal.”

#### **Beneficial Impacts of State Downloading of Social Welfare Responsibility**

The above information offers a brief description of the current context of social policy amongst western industrialized nations undergoing transformations towards neo-

liberalism, and the subsequent transfer of responsibility for social welfare provision from the state to the community level. This downloading of social welfare means that communities are increasingly responsible for their own well-being, and must adequately arrange themselves in order to find solutions to the dissolving welfare state. There are both positive and negative impacts to this shift, both of which will be discussed in this section. The shift to increased community self-government accompanying neo-liberal welfare reform holds several benefits for communities as these initiatives have the potential to enable communities to gain greater control and direction of their own social welfare. One benefit of the shift to community self-government is a greater recognition of, and attempt to address, the needs of marginalized communities. For example, Popple (2006) observes that governments in the United Kingdom are now focusing on some of their countries "most deprived communities, targeting additional resources towards eliminating unemployment, poor health, and improving education. This shift is important as marginalized communities" claims for access and entitlement to welfare are often ignored by the state. Thus, social policies aimed at community development and control of welfare provision have the potential to provide service to communities in a manner that respects the dignity and humanity of marginalized populations, upholding their right to participate in the decisions that affect them with mutuality and equality.

Not only do social policies aimed at enhancing community development acknowledge the importance of directing social welfare provision to the needs of the marginalized communities, they also defer to community knowledge as an important guide for both understanding welfare needs, and directing the way in which service provision should be delivered in order that it is useful for communities. In this way, these policies positively address the traditional „paradox of social welfare delivery", whereby responsibility for social policy remains in the hands of senior levels of government whereas social problems are experienced uniquely in local communities (Rice & Prince, 2000). As communities gain control of their own welfare through the shift to emphasizing community development, there is an eradication of the inconsistencies that result when those experiencing the local manifestations of social problems do not participate in developing the interventions aimed at addressing their needs.

These policies can also have beneficial impacts for they affirm the roles of the "indigenous non-professional" or "community guide" over the perspective of outside "experts." Ungar et al (2004) define community guides as community members whose relationship and social position within the community is valued because they work to interpret, negotiate, educate, and advocate for excluded members, bring them into the realms of community life. Welfare policies promoting community government defer to indigenous non-professionals, rather than state workers, to serve as a bridge between community members and to mobilize the development of reciprocity between community members. Therefore, both the knowledge and role of community leaders is respected through the implementation of these policies.

Another benefit of respecting such local knowledge is that welfare tends to be addressed in a more comprehensive manner when communities and their leaders direct service provision, as opposed to when welfare is implemented by the government. Rather than

direct service towards a single recipient group or policy area, as is often done by governments; communities tend to integrate their economic and social goals together. Rice and Prince (2000) note that “as well as helping people obtain more skills, community development processes try to create long term assets within the community” (p.223). As such, community self-government is more effective because local knowledge of the community’s lived experience is privileged and space is created so that people have control over their own affairs.

An additional benefit of states’ increasing encouragement of community self-government is that individual community members are provided with a greater opportunity to develop their own agency and personal skills. Several authors argue that civic engagement originates when people become involved in self governing community associations because such associations “encourage people to take positions, debate issues, support causes, and become involved in community activities” (Rice & Prince, 2000, p.210). Through collective welfare provision, community members develop leadership skills, improve their problem solving abilities, and develop ideas and strategies for solving local problems. Such skill development enhances the capacity and social capital upon which communities can rely. Not only are individual’s skills and capacities enhanced, community development also has the potential to improve people’s personal sense of identity. The rights and responsibilities associated with community membership affirm a sense of belonging amongst members (Popple, 2006). Additionally, collective identification of social problems experienced within the community affirms that personal troubles arise from public issues, rather than merely being a product of personal deficits. Thus, community development work can counter the individualistic norms reinforced through neo-liberal discourse that favors independence and individual merit over collective actions.

Connected to the development of individual agency and capacity arising from participation in self government is the enhancement of social cohesion amongst communities under the transfer of social welfare to the community level. Basok and Ilcan (2004) argue that community government develops mutual responsibility amongst community members, thereby providing a sense of interdependency and citizen engagement. Collaboration aimed at addressing welfare needs can encourage an understanding of broader public needs, an appreciation of the interests of others, and an acceptance of the obligations for others amongst members. As a result of the mutual responsibility fostered amongst the community, the “definition of social welfare extends beyond the rights and entitlements contained in welfare state policies to create reciprocity between citizens” (Rice & Prince, 2000, p.208). Such unity is beneficial for it reduces the oppressive power relations exercised over people. Rather than being bound by relations of authority and dependency, communities become bound together by relations of reciprocity and co-operation.

The shift from more institutional welfare state provision to the implementation of policies emphasizing community development are embraced by those who stress the innovation and independence of grassroots activism and welfare service provision (Lavalette and Ferguson, 1997). Community self-government enhances the individual

and collective capacities of communities, and creates space for communities to direct their own service provision. It is these aspects of social welfare downloading that pose several benefits for communities. Yet while there are many positives, there are also several negative aspects of this form of social welfare provision that prevent community self-government from having a positive impact on communities. It is important to explore the negative aspects of social welfare downloading in order to better understand the challenges communities encounter under shifts to self-government. The following section outlines how communities are negatively impacted by gaining greater responsibility for their social welfare.

### **The Negative Impacts of Community Responsibility for Welfare Provision**

One aspect limiting the positive impacts of policies emphasizing community development is the lack of resources available to communities which are needed to realize their welfare delivery plans. As the breadth and depth of poverty continues to increase with the adoption of neo-liberal policies, the shift to greater community governance undermines marginalized communities ability to adequately deliver welfare that was previously provided by the state. Such policies place an unreasonable burden upon communities who are not able to mobilize the resources required to develop the comprehensive services required to manage the negative impacts of neo-liberalism. As such, communities' entitlements to social welfare are eroded. Furthermore, the shift to community self-government can also erode the cohesion between communities. Popple (2006) argues that tension has increased between communities as they are forced to compete with each other for scarcer public resources.

The promotion of community governance and welfare provision accompanying neo-liberal political and economic policies also negatively impacts communities because these policies fail to address the power differentials existing amongst communities. Rice and Prince (2000) argue that "this darker side of communities takes social policy back to the fundamental question of legitimacy and the right recipients have to receive help from the community" (p.219). Thus, social welfare access becomes increasingly dependent on what those with power in the community deem to be „deserving“ qualities or needs, thereby perpetuating the class, race, gender, and other oppressive structures existing in society which differentiate people's access to welfare. Such differentiation of welfare is further compounded by the fact that social welfare funding is increasingly channelled through voluntary and not-for profit organizations which the community does not necessarily have control of, or participation in. Woolcock (2001) notes that community revitalization plans are often adopted by city officials and volunteer organizations, and as such the community's "shared plan" is not necessarily directed by all community members, for neither they, nor their associations sit at the planning table. The direction of funding to such organizations, rather than to entire community gives reason for authors discussing community self-government to be suspicious of the actual benefits of such policies, arguing that the "government does not respond to agendas set from below, but actually shapes policy programmes from above according to its own political agendas (Craig, 2007, p.338). Under the policy shifts initially outlined in the paper, communities are assumed to be neutral so that

inequalities and exclusive practices existing within communities and local agencies are ignored, with no concrete plans developed to mediate inequality and conflict.

Moreover, community self government plans are further problematic for individuals and their communities are made responsible for their own welfare, while the state increasingly removes itself from the role of social welfare provider. Basok and Ilcan (2004) refer to this process as the “responsibilization” of community members who begin to believe they “owe” their fellow community members service, and are directly responsible for their wellbeing. As noted in the previous section, such responsabilization can foster reciprocity between community members, deepening the social unity of the community. However, community government under neo-liberal ideology also marks a return to individualization of social problems whereby citizens are blamed for, and expected to solve their own conditions. Such individualization poses no form of redress for structural systems and institutional arrangements such as the adoption of neo-liberal policies, which shape and constrain individual’s lives. For example, there is a risk of “diverting attention away from the wider political economic forces which cause and maintain the concentrations of poverty and unemployment amongst communities” (Craig, 2007, p.336). Such an erasure of society’s oppressive structures means that marginalized groups will continue to face secondary social citizenship status which inhibits them from equally accessing social welfare. The individualization of responsibility for social welfare is also problematic for it creates a system of social welfare where there is no method through which people can make claims for a unified delivery of the universal entitlements we all share as humans. The movement back to the community weakens the universal rights once implied in national social programs, and welfare no longer becomes an entitlement (Rice & Prince, 2000). As such, governments get rid of their responsibility for the economic, social and environmental well being of communities.

Connected to the decreasing lack of universal standards amongst systems of welfare provision is an increasing removal of communities’ voices from the political forces shaping their lives. When services are provided by the national and provincial governments, there is a degree of accountability via the democratic process. It is true that service users, workers and local communities have never had as much democratic control over the local and national state system as is often claimed by supporters of modern western forms of governance (Lavalette and Ferguson, 2007). However, these processes did/do? incorporate some level of participation by communities and provided a mechanism through which government officials could generally be held accountable for their social welfare decisions. Yet, no similar mechanisms are provided with the downloading of welfare provision to the community level. As a result of decreased state involvement in welfare provision, and the subsequent emerging systems of community self-government, communities become external (reword) to welfare politics (Basok & Ilcan, 2004). The oppression and marginalization of community members is further heightened by neo-liberal ideologies and politics which prevent them from having voice in state actions aimed at reducing trade barriers, providing tax incentives for corporations, and privatizing public services under the guise of increasing the nation’s

international competitiveness. Thus, the form of community government advocated for by neo-liberal states creates a polarization of power and resources, whereby the local communities most in need are excluded from having a voice in public policy. It is important to note that the polarization of power and resources inherent in neo-liberal downloading of social welfare has a disproportionately negative impact on those already marginalized, such as racialized minorities and women. For example, Indigenous populations are further oppressed by state initiated community development projects and devolvement of social welfare, because such policies rarely acknowledge the historical colonialism and imperialism that continue to rob these populations of the resources needed to fully provide for their welfare needs. Alluding to the perpetuation of oppression, an Indigenous respondent in Craig's (2003) article notes that "to restore capacity in our people is to be *responsible for our own future*. Notice that I talk of restoring rather than building capacity in our people . . . we had 40 to 60,000 years of survival and capacity" (p.350, emphasis added). Shifts to welfare provision by the community also perpetuates the oppression of women as the burden of providing care falls to women who remain primarily in charge of reproductive labour. In addition, the deterioration of state funded welfare also results in intense job loss amongst female dominated professions, further increasing the precarious situation of women and intensifying the lack of value placed on their work (Baines, 2006). Thus, the transfer of responsibility for social welfare to the community level deepens the oppression of those already marginalized in society, thereby deepening their unequal access to welfare.

Community self-government also negatively impacts communities as advocacy work aimed at achieving social justice is compromised when community agencies struggle to accommodate the differing roles forced upon them by neo-liberal social policies. One reason for this is that organizations become increasingly responsible for service provision, thereby decreasing the time available to engage in social justice oriented activities. Also, Mowbray (2005) argues that funders ensure that any activities potentially regarded as political, such as advocacy work done by community members, are excluded from the framework of the agency's initiatives (as cited in Craig, 2007). The ability of community organizations to be communal voices for the marginalized is also impeded by the pressure agencies face to become more business-orientated amongst neo-liberal social policies. Lavalette and Ferguson (2007) state that the voluntary sector is "under pressure to operate at full cost recovery and to compete against the private sector on a level playing field as the private sector" (p. 456). Such shifts to business-based practices results in the implementation of stricter eligibility criteria for welfare services, greater focus on accountability and less comprehensive service delivery. As such, community organizations increasingly find themselves effectively carrying through the projects of neo-liberalism while simultaneously being restricted in their ability to encourage community resistance or social justice initiatives aimed at improving access to social welfare.

While the adoption of „community development" initiatives has much to offer in terms of the potential for greater "democratic renewal", it needs to be considered within a wider global context of neo-liberal policies (Popple, 2006). As depicted throughout the above section, the shift to community self government and control of welfare provision



accompanying the adoption of social policies grounded in neo-liberal ideology has intensified the differentiation of social welfare access amongst communities. Communities are negatively impacted by restricted entitlement to welfare provision resulting from downloading, as well as by the inadequate resources available for sufficient welfare provision. They also encounter a limiting of their opportunities to participate in the political processes shaping the conditions of their lives.

### **Community Resistance Aimed at Improving Access to Social Welfare**

It is important to understand both the positive and negative impacts communities endure resulting from shifts to greater community responsibility for welfare. Such a discussion enables us to better understand the opportunities available for altering the balance of power in the favor of communities so that their access to, and control of social welfare is improved. Resistance to the negative impacts of globalization and social welfare downloading is indeed a viable and necessary option. As Scholte (2005) notes "contemporary globalization has indeed generated very serious democratic deficits, but also significant opportunities to redress them" (p.37). Thus, in the remainder of the paper I will discuss some of the strategies communities can engage in to reform neo-liberal social policies so that their welfare needs are adequately addressed. Community directed initiatives can, and are being mobilized to challenge the fragmenting of the welfare state and macro level structures working to responsiblize people for their own welfare. An essential component of such resistance work is the „consciousness raising" amongst communities aimed at understanding the forces shaping their lived experiences. Inherent to our inability to act is our inability to see, thus in order to alter the negative impacts discussed above, we need to develop our understanding of the global social and political forces that interact with local circumstances. Craig (2007) argues that "part of active citizenship development is encouraging the ability of people to be critical of the established policy and political contexts" (p.340). As such, an integral step of building community resistance against neo-liberal policies is the development of initiatives that incorporate a sound analysis of the current social policy ideologies, highlighting both the opportunities and threats they pose for communities. Part of this activist work involves building an awareness of the nature of globalization as a process that is not inevitable or unchangeable. The impacts of current social policy discussed in this essay have been caused by the choices of individual elites. Thus, the consequent inequalities of globalization are not inevitable, rather they are products of decisions made by those in power and, as such, different choices can be enacted to viably reform and resist the negative impacts of globalization. Such engagement of communities in the collective exploration of the forces shaping their lives enables communities to more effectively strategize to reclaim access to adequate social welfare.

Another integral resistance action (reword) in which communities are engaged to actualize their social welfare entitlements is the formation of broader social movements and alliances. Varying community organizations are increasingly building community based partnerships aimed at creating fundamental social change. For example, Lavalette and Ferguson (2007) explain that "civil society organizations are often identified as key sources of mobilization and resistance to the power of global financial institutions and economically powerful nations" (p.447). Yet, in order to adequately address their goals, such community-based forms of resistance must work in collaboration with global

networks of resisters. The global economic, technological, cultural and political integration occurring as part of globalization demand that resistance be coordinated globally so that the complex influences causing oppression are comprehensively addressed. Although welfare retrenchment and the adoption of neo-liberal politics vary according to localities, communities affected by these trends do share commonalities. It is from these common positions of oppression and marginalization that communities can form a global alliance, and “solidarity is constructed from the vantage point of our differences” (Swepaul, 2006, p.430).

As Appadurai (2002) advocates, such cross-border activism is best facilitated through trans-national advocacy networks that “provide horizontal modes for articulating the deep democratic politics of the locality” (p.25). These networks of resistance are particularly effective because the decentralization of power created by globalization broadens the spectrum of places to target resistance, thereby enabling networks to collaborate globally while also engaging in local politics. For example, several church groups, labour unions, women activists, and environmentalists joined with other community movements during the Battle at Seattle to challenge the neo-liberal policies producing the deficient forms of community government outlined above. Thus, rather than establishing one form of resistance, or only devising either global or local strategies, the most successful resistance to the negative impacts of globalization is that which is rooted in community based struggles, while also working in tandem with global networks challenging the multiple levels and spaces in which the global elite operate at the expense of the rest of the world.

### **Conclusions**

The current shift to community responsibility for social welfare poses many challenges for all types of communities. The devolution of responsibility for welfare has not been accompanied by the devolution of power and resources needed to enact community level control, nor does the individualistic and self-sufficiency focus of the current neo-liberal context fit well with progressive and transformative community development. Yet, we must remember that the current processes of globalization are neither inevitable nor unalterable. Community government poses some benefits for communities, and there are opportunities to build resistance movements. Throughout, this paper I have attempted to demonstrate the potential strategies we (we who?) could enact in order to gain access and control of our social welfare. More work is obviously needed to thoroughly investigate the viability of resistance actions, and to actually plan the steps needed for social change.

Through mobilization of communities and the development of alliance networks between communities across the globe, we can resist the downloading of responsibility jeopardizing our communities in a way that ensures the current globally marginalized and impoverished gain sustainable control of their social welfare. Neo-liberalism is not a uniform process; it interacts with local contexts to create particular manifestations specific to localities. Yet, communities can collaborate around the common symptoms of welfare retrenchment and polarization of social, economic and political insecurity witnessed in the current global context. Resistance is a process we must continue to engage in, as “entitlements and rights for all will be diminished if people do not

mobilize themselves to claim the service entitlements they deserve” (Basok and Ilcan, 2004).

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