
Practice Forum

Social Defence and Community Empowerment

SCHWEIK ACTION WOLLONGONG*

This article introduces the idea of social defence, which is nonviolent community resistance to aggression as an alternative to military defence. An outline is given of some connections between the grassroots orientation to social defence and strands within community development. A community research project on telecommunications is described to illustrate the possible connections that can be forged between social defence and community empowerment.

The direct effects of government-organised violence are apparent: tens of millions of people dead in wars this century and dozens of countries ruled by military regimes that routinely use torture and killings to control the population. The problem is enormous. How can social workers contribute to a solution?

Some approaches, such as international diplomacy, offer little role for anyone except government officials. Citizens have a much greater opportunity to participate in peace movement campaigns; some social workers have joined such activities, and even been leaders of peace groups. But usually peace

movement campaigning is seen as something separate from the day-to-day activities of social workers.

In this article we discuss one possible way to link efforts against war and repression with the regular activities of social workers and community workers. We look at social defence, a nonviolent alternative to military defence, and discuss how it can relate to community development and social work. In its usual formulation, social defence is seen as a policy initiative at the national level. In order to pursue possible connections with community-level action, we focus on the grassroots approach to social defence and suggest some possible ways that social defence and community development can be mutually reinforcing. We then describe a community research project on social defence as an example of what can be done. The conclusion spells out some possible directions for social workers interested in social defence.

SOCIAL DEFENCE

The problem with which we are concerned is military aggression and repression. These threats are obvious enough in many countries around the world. But there is cause

to be concerned even in a country such as Australia, where the threat of military invasion is minimal (at least as assessed by the Australian Department of Defence). It is possible to imagine a political coup, similar to the events of 1975, but with elections cancelled and civil liberties curtailed. Another possibility is a serious case of real or alleged terrorism, such as a scaled-up version

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of the bombing at the Hilton Hotel in 1978, providing the pretext for declaration of a state of emergency and arrest of dissidents. In these and other scenarios, the military might support (or refuse to oppose) anti-democratic and repressive measures by the Australian government.

The sort of threat with which we are concerned thus could be a military invasion, a military coup, or imposition of ever more repressive measures by the government. We describe here a radical way to deal with such threats, namely to counteract or dissolve the crucial force behind the threats, military force, by organised nonviolent action called 'social defence.'

Social defence can be defined as nonviolent community resistance to aggression as an alternative to military defence. It relies on popular action in a variety of forms including petitions, rallies, strikes, boycotts, sit-ins, fasts and alternative institutions. Social defence is also known as nonviolent defence, civilian defence and civilian-based defence (Boserup and Mack 1974; Galtung 1976; King-Hall 1957; Niezing 1987; Roberts 1967; Sharp 1985).

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To defend civil society against external aggression or internal repression, nonviolent actions only would be used. As the capacity for nonviolent struggle is increased, military forces can be phased out and eventually eliminated. To most people, this sounds ridiculous at first. How could an army be stopped by demonstrations, boycotts and strikes?

The central assumption underlying social defence is that rule by any government depends on widespread cooperation or at least acquiescence by most of the population. When this cooperation is withdrawn, the regime collapses. The cooperation of military troops themselves is part of this. The use of force by resisters – whether this is military resistance or terrorism – tends to polarise society and justify the use of force by the regime. Nonviolent resistance, on the other hand, undermines the legitimacy of force by the regime. It can win over uncommitted people, including troops.

The most dramatic recent example of this process is the collapse of communist regimes in central and eastern Europe in 1989. These regimes relied on pervasive systems of control from secret police, and were heavily armed. Due to small nonviolent dissident groups and to the total loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the populace, most of these regimes collapsed with little bloodshed (Randle 1991).

Historical examples show that it is possible for nonviolent action to work in practical situations. Nonviolent action sometimes can be effective against invasions, as in the cases of the German resistance to the French and Belgian occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 (Sternstein 1967) and the Czechoslovak resistance to the Soviet invasion in 1968 (Windsor and Roberts 1969). In the case of military coups, where the military is the cause rather than

the solution to the problem of aggression, there are a number of examples of successful nonviolent resistance, including popular nonviolent resistance to the Kapp putsch in Germany in 1920 (Goodspeed 1962), non-cooperation by soldiers and civilians with the 1961 Algerian Generals' Revolt (Roberts 1975) and refusal to accept the Soviet coup in August 1991.

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Finally, nonviolent action can be effective against repressive governments, as in the cases of the toppling of the dictatorship in El Salvador in 1944 (Parkman 1988) and of Palestinian resistance to Israel rule (Rigby 1991).

One of the limitations of the historical examples of nonviolent actions is that they have largely been spontaneous. To expect spontaneous nonviolent action to be effective is like expecting a military force to be effective when there is no military production, training or planning. Social defence is likely to be much more successful if there is considerable advance preparation.

For example, factories could be designed so that they can be shut down easily by workers or retooled to produce products for the resistance. If an aggressor commandeered such a factory, the workers could bring production to a halt; crucial spare parts could be kept in a safe place, such as another country, so that even the threat of torture, in order to induce workers to get production going, would become pointless. Some trade

unions have reached agreements with employers about the introduction of new technologies, so it is possible to imagine agreements being pursued about designing factories for nonviolent resistance.

An aggressor might try to intimidate the population by cutting off crucial services: electricity, water, petrol, even food. Therefore, a community could prepare for nonviolent resistance by developing decentralised and self-reliant systems for producing food and energy. Even in present society, some analysts have argued that centralised energy systems make a society vulnerable to disruption, terrorism and the cut-off of imports (Lovins and Lovins 1982).

Television and radio stations are commonly the first targets in a military coup. Therefore, a community preparing for social defence should develop a dense communications system, especially of person-to-person systems such as telephone, fax, computer networks and shortwave radio. Other ways to prepare for social defence include extensive training (including development of skills in writing, speaking, decision-making and

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telecommunications), simulations and other exercises for gaining practical experience in using methods of nonviolent action, widespread learning of different languages (in order to be able to communicate with soldiers and civilians in any country from which a threat might arise), and links with sympathetic groups in foreign countries.

Some leading proponents of social defence – such as Theodor Ebert and Gene Sharp – have conceived of social defence solely as *national* defence, a simple replacement of military defence by social defence. They see this change to social defence occurring through the convincing of governments that nonviolent resistance would be more effective and less harmful than reliance on weapons of mass destruction. There have indeed been a number of government reports, mainly in Western European countries, on the possibilities for social defence. Whatever the promise of this approach, it does not provide any immediate connection with community development, at least until a government has agreed to implement a social defence system.

By contrast, there are a number of activist groups around the world that prefer to promote social defence through grassroots campaigns by trade unions, women's groups, neighbourhood associations and many others (Martin 1987).¹ Social defence is seen by these activists as something to be brought about through people's struggles, rather than implemented by governments on the basis of rational argument.

The promotion of social defence, from this perspective, would involve a multitude of actions and initiatives by numerous groups. For example, trade unions and other workers' groups might formulate plans for making industry more resistant to takeover and could run simulations of resistance involving strikes, work-ins, boycotts and other actions.

Neighbourhood groups might develop plans for and run exercises on holding emergency meetings, organising petitions, coordinating non-cooperation with repressive measures, helping with the distribution of food, organising transport and communicating messages.

When such initiatives are taken in present-day society, they can help to promote a transition from military defence to social defence, and they also are precisely the sorts of things that would be important in a well-functioning social defence system. This grassroots orientation provides the basis for forging a link between nonviolent action against aggression and the more general goals of building a community and defending it and its members from a range of perceived threats.

LINKS WITH COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

There are a number of links that can be made between the grassroots orientation to social defence and community development. Our comments here are preliminary, since the connections in this area have not been theorised before. Our aim is to open the area for discussion.

One link is at the level of the causes of social problems. The problem of war has been variously attributed to the system of nation-states, to capitalism and to patriarchy, among others, or more generally to systems of unequal power and wealth. Many of these same causes are used to explain problems of oppression, injustice and alienation which are of concern to community workers and social workers. But although there may be links between social defence and community development at the level of the causes of the problems they address, we believe the more obvious links lie in the methods used to deal with these problems.

Many working in the social welfare field do so with the intention of helping to bring about meaningful social change, namely towards a society providing greater justice, equality, community and satisfaction (Lees and Mayo 1984). Such change needs to occur at the macro as well as the micro level of

society. These aims are shared by many social defence activists.

Another connection lies in an insistence on compatibility between means and ends. If social welfare work is to alleviate the effects of disadvantage and alienation then, it can be argued, it is just not enough to patch up individual problems as they arise. There must be a change in the system within which these problems are occurring. From a community development viewpoint, this change should occur in a manner that is consistent with the goal (Leaper 1971). If we want a more equitable, caring and less violent world, then we must proceed along a pathway that replicates and therefore advances these ideals. To do otherwise is to fail before we have started. This same theme is central to social defence: a society without the military is the goal, and nonviolent methods must be used to get there.

Some activists, in both the peace and welfare fields, prefer a definition of violence that extends beyond physical violence to include social violence, namely poverty, exploitation and disempowerment. Physical and social violence reinforce each other in a cycle that feeds upon itself until the cycle is broken. Nonviolent methods are required to break this cycle as violent means of struggle merely propagate further violence. In struggling to increase people's control over their lives and to bring about increasing measures of social justice, the cycle of social violence can be broken. It is important for this break in the cycle of violence to occur at as many levels of society as possible for the break to be truly effective.

Some activists have argued that community development has a fundamental need for nonviolent action. For example, the Nonviolence Study Group (1980 p.27) claims that in the Third World:

The rising aspirations of the many (brought about by com-

munity development) and the development of a few (actually achieved by community development) generated a situation of greater frustration and violence.

They claim that community development thus far has not succeeded in achieving its aims. The Group goes on to argue that nonviolent action to empower people and bring about 'development toward community' is needed to achieve the ideals of community development. The idea of development toward community entails fundamental changes to society, but it does not seek to *wrest* power from the establishment. Instead it seeks to evolve new relationships in society emphasising equity and cooperation with power *sharing*. Since it seeks fundamental change to a new social order, it is not a reformist movement. It advocates nonviolent struggle toward a win-win solution, thus facilitating power sharing. A power takeover, by contrast, creates a new disadvantaged group which again struggles, often violently, against the new social order.

Another connection between the grassroots approach to social defence and community development is an emphasis on small group self-reliance, with people acting on their own behalf, thereby exercising decision-making power over their own lives. Social defence and community development each seek to develop space for *all* people to be involved in their own advancement and defence, by whatever means they are able to achieve. They also share information and power, thereby encouraging people to take action themselves rather than rely on other bodies or individuals to provide solutions (Henderson and Thomas 1980).

These sorts of connections have been explicitly made by some leading proponents of nonviolence. Gandhi saw the use of nonviolent

action against the British in India as part of a wider program to build a self-reliant and non-oppressive society through grassroots action. Gandhi's successors, especially Vinoba Bhave, have also emphasised a positive program of village development or 'sarvodaya' (Kantowsky 1980; Ostergaard 1985).

Social defence can be used as a basis for action and for goal setting for community development and

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community work. If community development means struggling to overcome the disempowerment of individuals and their communities, then to be successful in its aims it must also come to terms with the wider sources of that disempowerment. Efforts to promote participative democracy therefore are relevant to community development. Social defence seeks to empower people to develop their own methods of defence. It requires systems whereby people themselves define what is worth defending and how it is to be defended. If people are an integral part of the defence systems that protect their own communities, they are thus empowered through collective, self-generated and cooperative action.

When we speak of 'participative democracy' and 'empowering' people and communities, this sug-

gests a form of social decision-making rather different from the present one. It is not our task to spell out the alternative in detail. Advocates of both community development and social defence would agree about the desirability of society having less repression and greater 'participation' but there would be less agreement about the nature of the alternative. Indeed, one of the key points of the process of community development is that people should decide for themselves what forms the alternative will take. The same would apply to the grassroots orientation to social defence.

In this discussion, we have frequently used the terms 'community' and 'people'. These terms hide a diversity of interests, aims and capabilities. The concept of the 'community' can be unpacked in various ways, for example in terms of families, neighbourhoods, genders, age groups and occupations, and undoubtedly there are various contradictions and conflicts between various groups or sectors of the community. Hence, 'community empowerment' is not always straightforward. For example, empowering women may be seen as a threat by some men.

One of the assumptions of community development is that there is a sufficient commonality of interests, at least on some issues and for some purposes, to serve as a basis for social change. Similarly, social defence is postulated on the existence of a widespread interest in opposing certain types of aggression and repression. These assumptions are borne out by some historical examples. For example, many of Gandhi's campaigns were successful in Indian society, a society that was and is deeply riven by differences in caste, race, religion, gender and wealth. On the other hand, one of the aims of both community development and social defence – and of Gandhi – is to help break down social antago-

nisms through the very process of struggling against oppression.

We have outlined a number of potential connections between the grassroots orientation to social defence and strands within community development, including common causes of the problems addressed, similar social goals of the practitioners, a commitment to a compatibility between methods and goals (especially the use of nonviolent methods) and self-reliance and popular empowerment. It should be noted that these similarities do not apply to all of social defence or community development. The 'elite reform' orientation within social defence focuses on change at the government level and has paid little attention to work within the community. Similarly, only some strands within community work emphasise nonviolence and self-reliance.

While we have shown a number of potential affinities between social defence and community development, these affinities will only have significance if there are practical projects that forge the links. One such project is described in the next section.

A COMMUNITY RESEARCH PROJECT

We are members of Schweik Action Wollongong, a small voluntary group seeking to create greater awareness of social defence. The group was set up in 1986 and 1987 when one of us, then new to Wollongong, invited others to set up a social defence group. Since then, there have been three to five members of the group.

In planning our activities, we wanted to incorporate our goals into our methods. There is a lot of literature about nonviolent resistance to repression, using methods such as strikes, boycotts, rallies, sit-ins and so forth. But we did not want to be in the position of telling people what *we* thought *they* ought to know. This tends to alienate peo-

ple: 'who do these arrogant people think they are anyway?'

Rather than claiming to be experts and then preaching to people, we designated a project in which we were the investigators and others were the experts. This project lies in the tradition of community research and action research (Lees and Smith 1975; Wadsworth 1984, 1991). We aimed to accomplish several goals simultaneously:

1. to gain specific detailed information about methods of nonviolent resistance to repression;
2. to encourage our interviewees to think about the possibility of repression in a crisis situation and how they might respond to it;
3. to operate as a self-managing collective with a minimum of bureaucracy and finance, and to have a good time;
4. to distribute our findings to interested groups in Australia and around the world.

Our project did all this with a minimum of fuss. As a preliminary exercise, we carried out a small-scale investigation into how the postal system could be used to communicate in the event of a crisis (Rawling et al. 1990). This gave us the experience and confidence to proceed with the bigger topic of telecommunications. We chose telecommunications since it is an interesting and relevant area, but we could have chosen any one of dozens of other areas in industrial production, services, transport, energy and publishing. As well, there are non-technical dimensions to nonviolent resistance, such as morale, unity and loyalty, that deserve extended investigation.

We started by interviewing a member of our group who works with computers. This gave us valuable practice in developing our approach. We then sought other people to interview. We started with people we knew, asked our friends for names, and asked each interviewee for other names. Since we were seek-

ing information and raising issues, there was no need for a random sample. We had a much higher success rate obtaining interviews when we approached people through friends than when we had no prior link with them at all.

Nearly every interview with someone in telecommunications provided valuable additional information. An example is our interview with a computer communications specialist. We began by asking, 'Imagine a situation where a repressive government has taken power. How could telecommunications technologies be used to oppose the regime?'

Answer: 'A computer network is an excellent way to communicate in a crisis. It would be easy to set up a prearranged set of signals to use in an emergency.'

We inquired: 'But can a message be sent on a computer network without identifying the sender?'

Answer: 'Not normally. Network managers like to keep control of who is sending what. One way around this would be to encrypt the message: the message wouldn't be easy to decipher, although its source would be known. Another approach is to use a public phone. With a small portable computer and a modem, messages could be sent without identifying the source.'

Telecommunications are also important in opposing repression in neighbouring countries. After the 1987 military coups in Fiji, telecommunications were vitally important in informing the world about what was happening, and also in informing people in Fiji, since the local media were censored.

Some of the technologies available seem ideally suited for such situations. Our interviewee told us about packet radio:

All you need is a laptop (portable) computer, battery powered, and a portable radio and an aerial that can be made out of a coat-hanger. It can all

be hidden easily in a briefcase. With this setup, it is possible to send out a packet of information, in digital form (rather than audio like a normal radio signal). The packet could be sent to other ham radio operators, or straight up to one of the ham radio satellites. The satellites would hold the packet and then beam it down at the appropriate time, perhaps halfway around the world.

It is not difficult to learn how to use amateur radio, but relatively few people do so. This is only one mode of telecommunications. Others include computer networks, fax and the familiar telephone, radio and television.

As well as finding out how the technologies could be used, we probed about how they could be used to interfere with acts of repression, about the impacts of sabotage, threats and shutdowns in electricity supplies, and about the likely sympathies of those who currently are most familiar with the technologies.

Our first goal was to learn how telecommunications could be used as part of a nonviolent resistance. We carried out 15 or 20 interviews. After this many, it became apparent that strictly technical issues were only part of the problem. Even more

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important were the social dynamics of any struggle: the willingness of people to take action, their skills, the actions of the regime, and so forth. In assessing these factors as well as the technical issues, the group’s combined knowledge and

experience were essential. Indeed, the interviews were highly effective in stimulating our own thinking and understanding about the topic. So both the content of the interviews and the effect of the interviews on our own thinking helped us achieve our first goal.

The interviews by necessity required the interviewee to think about nonviolent resistance, thereby satisfying our second goal. In addition, we offered interviewees copies of our own literature. We promised them anonymity.

Our third goal was to operate as a self-managing collective. Our small group was more than large enough for the project, even though all of us were busy with our own careers. We met every few weeks over a meal, evaluated our activities and planned for upcoming ones. Any costs are covered by on-the-spot contributions – no newsletter, no membership lists, no administrative positions. We do keep one copy of minutes which is written as each meeting proceeds. By minimising administrative overheads and maximising attention to the issues, we have tried to maintain mutual support and personal interest in the group. Although at times we have proceeded very slowly, our membership and level of activity have been much more stable than that of the peace movement, which went from very high levels in the mid 1980s to virtual non-existence in the 1990s. This is because social defence is a long-term goal and a positive alternative; by comparison, mobilising against the Gulf War was a short-term effort made in response to events.

Finally, there is considerable interest in other countries in our projects. Earlier Australian work giving practical examples of how people in local communities can use nonviolent action against aggression has been distributed widely and translated into Italian and Dutch (Quilty et al. 1986). Our

preliminary findings have been published (Schweik Action Wollongong 1992). We could have carried out more interviews, but we decided that publishing at this stage would be a better way of generating useful feedback. Most of all, we hope to encourage others to undertake similar projects.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

Many social workers are aware that the day-to-day problems of individuals are linked to wider social problems. The familiar difficulty is to forge a connection between the two and, more importantly, to develop ways of addressing both together (Tomlinson 1978). Here we have tackled one

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aspect of this general problem, namely the problem of military systems and war. We have described how social defence, an alternative to military defence, has certain affinities with strands within community development. Because social defence provides a participative alternative to military methods, rather than just a protest against war, it provides a way for community workers and social workers to be involved in promoting an alternative to warfare.

But what can social workers specifically do? By analogy with our project on telecommunications, social workers who want to help

promote the capacity for social defence can undertake projects to study the resources of individuals and groups to resist aggression and repression. This does not mean studying the community, but rather studying *with* the community. Individuals and groups have many resources, from telephones and vegetable gardens to talents in persuasion and organising. Developing these resources should be a legitimate part of social work; it certainly serves both community development and social defence.

For example, social workers might encourage their clients to develop a rapid-response support network, using family members, friends, welfare workers and others. This would involve discussing contingencies and how to respond to them, liaising with other members of the network, planning which communication systems to use, and testing and evaluating the network. Such a network could serve a valuable service to clients in need; it could empower the client to become less dependent on professional services; and it could serve as a component of a social defence network.

Closer to home, social workers could run workshops to examine their own workplaces and activities. What threats are there to services? (Funding cuts, police violence against clients and a military coup are all potential threats.) What responses can be made to these threats? What things need to be done to be better prepared? And so forth. Any exercise along these lines will inevitably address issues of relevance to both community empowerment and social defence.

Social workers have much to offer to the interpersonal dimension of social defence. The morale and unity of a nonviolent resistance are crucial (Boserup and Mack 1974; Keyes 1981). Much more than most others, social workers can probe, in a very practical, locally based and relevant way,

what makes a community work together or fall apart.

Finally, social workers would be crucial participants in the nonviolent struggles of any future social defence system. Their networks of contacts with individuals and organisations give them a superb understanding of community power structures and how to mobilise for action. By developing this knowledge and sharing it with others, social workers can help build community strength now as well as to defend against possible future assaults.

The question that motivated this article was, 'How can the struggle for a global alternative to war relate to community development and social work?' There are a number of ways to answer this question; we have pursued one answer, namely a connection to social defence. Whether this is a fruitful direction will depend on future thought and action.

The comments we have made here are preliminary suggestions. Social defence, in terms of understanding and development, is in its infancy. Only when more social workers become involved in action to develop social defence can the full range of connections between social defence and community development become known.

ENDNOTES

1 Indeed, many activists favour a broader definition of social defence, using the term to refer to grassroots nonviolent action against government or other repression. To avoid confusion with nonviolent action generally, we use here the narrower definition of social defence presented in the text, namely as an alternative to military defence.

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