

HOME



## South Africa: Save Our Souls

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EDITORIAL

Johannesburg — SOCIAL work must be one of the few professions where those in government service are better paid than those outside it. But one of the big issues nonprofit social welfare organisations will protest about when they march in Johannesburg this week is that the government pays more for social workers than the nonprofits can afford to.

"Equal pay for equal work" will be one of the protestors' slogans. And it's not hard to see why. Entry-level salaries for social workers, who have four-year university degrees, can be as low as R7200 a month gross in the nonprofit organisations (NPOs), while even chief social workers earn no more than R12500. The result is that the NPOs, which do a lot of in-service training, lose social workers to the government and the corporate sector all the time.

But it's not only, or even primarily, their own pay that the social workers in the nonprofit sector will protest about this week. They will be demanding higher subsidies for their organisations from provincial government, to enable them to do the welfare work they were set up to do. And their cause deserves support.

Welfare is important -- much more important than the government has acknowledged in recent years. Nearly 16% of the consolidated budget goes on "social protection", which is one of the largest single items of government spending. But almost all of that goes to social grants -- state old-age pensions, child support and disability grants -- with only a tiny fraction spent on welfare services as such.

But those welfare services are essential services, targeting society's most vulnerable people.

And it is the NPOs that are providing them where the government does not -- to abused women, or the aged, to the rising number of orphans and child-headed households, as well as to disabled people and those with HIV/AIDS. They counsel those traumatised by crime, deal with drug addiction and mental illness and help families or communities in crisis.

Many of the government's own programmes can't be implemented without social workers -- grants for foster children, for example, or the public works and early childhood development programmes.

Yet more than half of SA's practising social workers are in the NPO sector, which is key to supporting these programmes. And they tend to be better than clumsy government bureaucracies at providing welfare services.

But many of these organisations are struggling to fund their work. Government funding is in short supply. So, too, is money from the Lotto, which, although it is supposed to fund welfare organisations, has disbursed cash only very slowly and erratically.

Most NPOs rely heavily on funding from international and local foundations, and from the corporate sector, and that funding has been hit hard by the recession.

The government's own revenue has been cut so the scope for higher subsidies is limited. But ways must

be found to fund these essential welfare services -- and to ensure they can hold on to skills.

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