

Social workers and policy practice: (Re)Defining the role of social work on indigent policy design and implementation in South Africa

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Abstract

This study examined the role of social workers in designing and implementing municipal indigent policies in South Africa. The study used qualitative research to assess social workers' roles in designing and implementing indigent policies. In addition, the study used a case study design, using the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality as a case study. Data was collected from extensive literature using documents from 2019 to 2025. Data was analysed using thematic analysis. This study revealed that the engagement of social workers in indigent policy design and implementation is very low, and this exclusion of social workers has led to limited advocacy for indigent policy change, failure to build effective coalitions, indigents' lack of awareness regarding the indigent policy, and exclusion of more deserving people in accessing indigent support. This study proposes that social workers be actively involved in the indigent policy implementation process, as they are highly skilled professionals able to deal with the most vulnerable community members. Within the indigent policy implementation process, social workers can play a significant role in municipal indigent policy development and evaluation by identifying and verifying indigents and advocating for indigents' rights, ensuring they receive the support they are entitled to under indigent policies, such as counselling and psychosocial support.

Keywords: *social work, indigents, public policy, municipality, policy design, policy implementation*

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1. Introduction

Promoting social justice is one of the main aims of the social work profession (Carrilho & Branco, 2023; Petersen & Pretorius, 2022; Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2019). There is wide approval within the social work profession that promoting social justice requires social workers to engage in policy practice (Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2019). In this regard, social workers should play a significant role within the policy cycle, including identifying relevant social problems and calling for people's, media's, and policymakers' attention, which is known as setting the policy agenda. In addition, they should be involved in policy development through the provision of inputs and policy implementation, where they are directly involved in putting policy requirements into practice. Social workers should also be involved in policy evaluation, which draws lessons from the policy experience. However, a considerable gap exists between the perceived role of social workers in policy practice and reality. Despite the advocacy for social workers to play an active role in implementing municipal indigent policies in South Africa, their involvement is marginal.

In 2003, the South African Government introduced the National Framework for Municipal Indigent Policies (NFMIP), which guides municipalities in developing indigent policies aimed at reducing poverty and inequalities and ensuring that no one is left behind in accessing essential services (Kuhlegisa, 2024). According to the NFMIP (2003), municipalities should support indigents by providing potable water, sanitation, electricity, and refuse collection. Kuhlegisa et al. (2024) posit that the service standards within the NFMIP concerning potable water and electricity stipulate 6 kl (kilolitres) of free water and 50 kWh (kilowatt-hour) of free electricity per household per month.

The extent to which refuse collection and sanitation are subsidised differs from municipality to municipality. The term 'indigent' implies a person who lacks the necessities of life, lives below the poverty line, and cannot pay for municipal services (NFMIP, 2003). Pillay (2021) argues that living in extreme poverty excludes indigents from accessing basic services. Fuo (2020) defines indigents as people living in dire poverty. According to Leburu (2017), indigents are those who cannot afford basic services. The NFMIP targets individuals excluded from having access to basic municipal services, providing a social safety net that ensures productivity and healthy society engagement (Kuhlegisa, 2024).

This study focused on the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality (BCMM), which is one of the biggest municipalities in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The

municipality has been implementing indigent policies since 2005. The municipality has a total population of 858,000 people, of which 467,000 are classified as indigents, yet only 83,000 people benefit from indigent support (BCMM Annual Report, 2023). Despite the NFMIP (2003) aiming to eradicate poverty, reduce inequality gaps and ensure that all indigents receive support, there are discrepancies in implementing the policy in the BCMM, leaving numerous people unable to access indigent support. Against the above, this study examined social workers' roles in implementing indigent policies to ensure that no one is excluded from accessing basic services.

Several scholars have written on indigent policies in South Africa (Mosehla, 2022; Mukonavanhu et al., 2022; Pillay, 2021). Pillay (2021) investigated factors undermining indigent policy success, Mukonavanhu et al. (2022) assessed the impact of an indigent water policy on the lives of impoverished people in local governments, Mosehla (2022) examined the implementation of the indigent policy in the Greater Tzaneen, and Kuhlengisa et al. (2024) examined variations in the adoption of the NFMIP. However, inasmuch as there is growing literature on indigent policies in South Africa, there is limited research on assessing the role of social workers in designing and implementing indigent policies. Therefore, this study sought to fill this research gap and contribute towards ensuring that social workers play a significant role in poverty alleviation, reducing inequality, and ensuring that no one is excluded from accessing basic services. The study sought to answer the question: What is the role of social workers in the design and implementation of indigent policies in South Africa?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Indigent Policy Practices in Global Contexts

Globally, various countries have adopted different approaches to ensure that indigent populations are supported. In Scotland, programmes like the Universal Basic Services Framework offer indigent support services, including access to healthcare, legal services, education, transport, food, information, and shelter (Buchs, 2021). In this framework, local authorities, citizens, the corporate sector, and non-profit organisations collaborate effectively to enhance the programme's impact and achieve its goals. The beneficiaries of these universal basic services are identified through regular outreach and community engagement programmes. Gough (2019) argues that the Universal Basic Services Framework in Scotland aims to provide basic services to impoverished people, ensuring that access to essential

services is a right, not a privilege. Coote (2023) states that the Universal Basic Services Framework obligates the duty to offer these services to the local authorities responsible for funding the initiative.

In Colombia, the Minimum Essential Potable Water programme ensures that all households can access adequate potable water (Vargas & Heller, 2016). The local municipality provides this potable water to the beneficiaries. For instance, the Bogota Municipality successfully provides a minimum of 6 kl of water to every household per month, translating to approximately 50 litres of water per day per person. However, it is essential to note that these calculations are based on a household having four people, which might not be the case for every household, as some households may have more than four people. Municipalities have a socioeconomic stratification of households according to six strata to determine the beneficiaries, with households in Strata 1, 2 and 3 qualifying for free services (Millers & Sweigart, 2019). Solidarity and Income Redistribution Funds (Fondos de Solidaridad y Redistribución del Ingreso – FSRI) fund these services. Notably, when a municipality fails to fund such services, the national government or relevant state entity will fund those services for the households in the first three strata.

2.2 Indigent Policy Design and Implementation in South Africa

The NFMIP (2003) indicates that municipalities must consider the indigent services level, financial framework, indigent targeting options, qualification criteria for selecting indigents, partnerships, and monitoring when developing and implementing their indigent policies. The NFMIP guides municipalities in developing their indigent policies and determining service standards. In accordance with this framework, municipalities must provide potable water, sanitation, refuse collection, and free electricity to indigents (NFMIP, 2003). In addition, the NFMIP (2003) stipulates that municipalities should provide the necessary infrastructure to provide 25 litres of potable water per person per day, translating to 6,000 litres per household per month at eight persons per household. However, several scholars have argued that this perpetuates inequalities in accessing potable water since this amount of water is insufficient for human survival (Maramura, 2017; Shayamano, 2020). According to Shayamano (2020), human beings require additional water beyond drinking, such as for hygiene purposes, including bathing, cleaning and hand washing, rendering the daily water allocations insufficient. Maramura (2017) argues that humans require at least 50 litres of

potable water per day to meet basic hygiene and sanitation needs. Even though the intentions of the indigent policies of providing potable water are good, the current water allocations remain insufficient for indigent households.

In terms of electricity, the framework stipulates that indigent households should receive 50 kWh of electricity per month; however, several scholars have questioned the adequacy of the current allocations for indigents' survival (Pillay, 2021; Khambule, 2022; Ngeve, 2019). Kuhlengisa et al. (2024) argue that the current electricity allocations for indigent households are accepted as a norm for free basic electricity, which means it is sufficient for domestic purposes. However, Ledger (2021) believes that getting extensive approval does not mean it is in accordance with international practices, as 250 kWh is considered adequate per international standards. The researcher agrees with Ledger, as a Department of Monitoring and Evaluation study found that 56% of households consume more than the current monthly electricity allocations (DME, 2003). This means the standards stipulated by the NFMIP concerning electricity are inadequate and perpetuate poverty and inequality.

Financial framework. The NFMIP identifies three ways in which municipalities can fund indigent policies. These three methods are cross-subsidies from non-residential and high-income consumers, core administration revenue, and equitable shares (NFMIP, 2003). Leburu (2017) posits that administration revenue and equitable shares are the two most common ways to fund municipal indigent policies. However, these funding methods have well-documented challenges; Alers (2022) and Khambule (2022) argue that most municipalities in rural areas are unable to fund their indigent policies through administrative revenue because they cannot collect service charge fees from residents within their jurisdiction. Therefore, these municipalities depend on equitable shares only, which may not be sufficient to finance all municipal needs. Ruiters (2018) defines equitable shares as an unconditional Treasury grant that allows municipalities to allocate funds in their budgets in a manner that enables them to meet their constitutional and legislative mandates. However, these funds are not meant solely for indigent support, and sometimes, municipalities use this grant to pay salaries, leaving them with insufficient funds to support their indigent policies, which negatively impacts indigents in these municipalities, excluding some from accessing free basic services.

Indigent targeting options. The indigent targeting option is another guide provided by the NFMIP. The NFMIP (2003) offers options for municipalities to target indigents within their jurisdiction. Municipalities can use property value, means testing, or geographic (zonal)

targeting when targeting indigents. Property value as a classification measure requires determining the specific value of a property that qualifies for indigent support to target households below a certain household income threshold (Alers, 2022). Pillay and Muteroko (2022) indicate that zonal targeting involves a municipality identifying a particular area as poor, and service tariffs are adjusted accordingly. However, these targeting methods are not without their challenges. Kuhlengisa et al. (2024) argue that employing means testing as a targeting option may lead to the stigmatisation of indigents, the non-take-up of indigents' benefits, and the 'poverty trap', which are counterproductive to the broader aim of indigent policies.

Leburu (2017) notes that using zonal targeting can potentially include non-indigent households in areas designated as poor, resulting in inefficient allocation of resources and indigent benefits to those who may not truly need them. Regarding the use of property value as an indigent targeting strategy, various scholars have highlighted its weakness, which is that it assumes that there is a direct correlation between property value and financial capacity (Ruiter, 2018; Fuo, 2020) which excludes indigents living in high-value properties experiencing poverty due to unemployment, while including citizens living in low-value properties who may not be indigent. Some municipalities stipulate that for a person to qualify for indigent support, they must own the property on which they reside (Leburu, 2017). This qualification criterion is used in most South African municipalities and often discriminates against indigent foreigners, indigents staying in informal settlements, and indigents who are renting someone else's property.

Variations in the adoption of the framework. In addition, while the government has provided the NFMIP to guide indigent policies in South Africa, implementation varies significantly across municipalities. Metropolitan municipalities often have larger budgets and more robust financial systems that allow them to provide more comprehensive support to indigents. In contrast, district and local municipalities often struggle with resource constraints and limited revenue streams, resulting in substandard support for indigents. For instance, the BCMM has established an indigent support office; however, small municipalities such as the Amathole District Municipality do not have the capacity to establish a standalone indigent support office and must rely on existing municipal employees to support indigent policy implementation (Kuhlengisa et al., 2024). This intensifies discrepancies in policy implementation and outcome. Well-resourced municipalities with a substantial revenue base,

such as Ekurhuleni, exceed the NFMIP's provisions and provide 9,000 litres of water instead of the stipulated 6,000 litres per household per month. This highlights the variations in municipalities' adoption and implementation of the NFMIP in South Africa, which can be attributed to differences in municipal resources, capacity, and local context.

Stakeholders in the design and implementation of the policy. Furthermore, the NFMIP identifies seven main stakeholders involved in the indigent application and verification process (NFMIP, 2003). These are inclusive of municipal service departments such as Eskom and the Municipal Finance Department, which is responsible for verifying an indigent's status; the municipal manager, who must sign off the indigent lists generated; and the ward councillor, who is responsible for verifying the applicants. The last group of actors is the indigent households, which are the end users of the services. Indigent households play a vital role in this process as they apply for indigent support and receive the subsidy if they qualify. Table 1 shows the actors and their responsibilities.

Table 1

The key actors of the indigent policy and their roles

Actors	Roles
Municipal Service Department	Responsible for the provision of services to indigents.
Finance Department	Verifies indigent status, including their particulars on the municipality's financial system, and notifies the indigent of their benefits.
Municipal Manager	Signs-off on the indigent list created.
Free Basic Services Management Team	Manages all registrations and verifies applications.
Ward Councillors	Verifies applications.
Community Development Workers	Assists with the registration of indigents.
Indigent Households	Applies for indigent support.

Source: NFMIP, 2003

Table 1 above shows the key stakeholders in indigent policy design and implementation; however, social workers are not acknowledged as key stakeholders in the process, even though their involvement would benefit the implementation process significantly. Therefore, there is a need to address this exclusion of social workers from indigent policy formulation and implementation processes.

Implementation challenges. Implementing the indigent policy in South Africa is imperative as it closes the gap between those who can afford essential services and those who cannot. However, implementing this policy has challenges that affect its effectiveness. Although this policy intends to provide access to services for impoverished people, several structural factors have constrained its effectiveness. These include political dynamics, institutional weaknesses, and a lack of clarity on policy design. According to Sadie (2017), politics play a pivotal role in the implementation of policies in South Africa, with different municipalities being led by different political formations. As a result, national policies that do not align with the ideology of the municipal party in power may not be prioritised during resource allocation, leading to failures in policy implementation.

In addition, institutional weaknesses, such as the municipality's lack of technical capacity, staff, or budget, also negatively affect policy implementation success. For instance, Khoza and Mukonza (2024) found that employees in Nkomazi Local Municipality lack adequate training and expertise to effectively address the complex challenges indigents face, leading to a failure to implement the indigent policy effectively. Additionally, municipalities in South Africa do not have specific budgets for indigent support and instead rely on an equitable share grant from the Treasury. South African municipalities should learn from the Bogota Municipality in Colombia, which has provisions to fund access to free water and not rely on the national government for assistance. It is critical to address the above-mentioned structural challenges so that South African municipalities can implement indigent policies that achieve their intended objectives.

2.3 Defining Policy Practice Within the Social Work Profession

Policy practice in social work relates to applying social work skills in proposing new policies and changing existing policies to achieve social and economic justice (Cummins et al., 2023). Carrilho and Branco (2023) define policy advocacy as a strategic process influencing and shaping public policy. Elebshehe (2024) posits that policy practice is critical

in shaping the social, economic, and political landscape, and it also influences the well-being of individuals, families, groups, and communities. Since social workers work directly with vulnerable groups, engaging them in policy practice is critical to address systemic issues and advocate for social change. In addition, social workers are often involved with individuals and families, ensuring that their needs are met by linking them with available resources, developing intervention plans and monitoring the implementation of such plans (Cummins et al., 2023). This brings about positive change for these individuals and their families. However, in some instances, social workers may encounter difficulties linking their clients with resources due to systematic barriers, prompting them to engage in policy practice to effect changes in communities and social systems, thus making policy practice in social work critical.

According to Saxena and Chandrapal (2021), social work practitioners play a critical role in policy practice, including agenda setting, policy design, and policy implementation and evaluation. Manyama and Mvungi (2017) assert that the role played by social workers in policy practices includes engagement in advocacy, coalition building, awareness campaigns, policy analysis, and ensuring equitable access to services. As a result of their direct experience working with marginalised community members, social workers are well-positioned to advocate for social justice issues. This advocacy may be for individual cases and policy advocacy for systemic change (Manyama & Mvungi, 2017).

Social workers' involvement is critical in problem identification and calling for the attention of citizens, the media, and policymakers in advocating for public policies (Manohar, 2019). Owing to social workers' experience and knowledge in dealing with legislation and its limitations, they significantly contribute to identifying what works and what does not in policy.

Table 2 illustrates the public policy process and the critical gaps in social work involvement. The policy process often excludes social workers, yet their professional expertise better positions them to engage in each process phase. Thus, integrating them into the policy process can lead to more inclusive and sustainable policy-based solutions to solve community problems.

Table 2*Public policy process and social work practice gaps*

Policy stage	Explanation	Social work involvement
Policy Formulation	This involves identifying community needs, setting priorities, and proposing solutions to address the identified community needs.	Social workers are rarely involved in this process, with their voices often absent.
Policy Adoption	This involves the approval of policies by authorities.	Social workers are not involved in the legislative processes.
Policy Implementation	This entails the actual delivery of services and the operationalisation of policies.	Social work professionals are not adequately involved in implementing indigent policies. The administrative staff often leads the implementation of this policy.
Policy Monitoring	This is the ongoing assessment of the policy implementation.	Social workers have little to minimal involvement in indigent policy monitoring.
Policy Review or Evaluation	This involves analysing the effectiveness of the policy and its outcomes.	There is no evidence of social workers' involvement in indigent policy evaluation.

Source: Researcher's Construction**Table 3***Social workers' activities in policy practice*

Social workers' activity	Explanation
Policy Analysis	This entails studying a particular public policy to gain a clear and precise understanding of its aims, goals, strategies, and impact on individuals, families, groups, and communities. It also involves the identification of needs and gaps and the evaluation of a policy's effectiveness.
Advocating for Change	This entails engaging policymakers to advocate for and influence decisions on developing new policies and modifying existing policies to benefit the individuals, groups and communities they serve.
Building Coalitions and Networks	This entails developing and maintaining good relationships with other professionals and key stakeholders to develop and present a coordinated advocacy strategy.
Awareness Campaigns	This entails creating a strategic approach to increase public understanding of an existing policy, the need for a new one, or the amendment of an existing one. This can be done by creating a coherent message for radio adverts.

Source: Cummins et al. (2023)

Table 3 highlights what social workers can do within the policy process. The social workers' activities are key to policy practice. Engaging in these activities is crucial in shaping

and implementing policies that promote social justice and the well-being of individuals, groups, families, and communities. Additionally, Cummins et al. (2023) assert that social workers are key players in policy practice, leveraging their generalist skills to influence and shape policies that promote social justice and address the needs of marginalised communities. These skills include networking, collaboration, problem-solving, negotiation, engagement, assessment, and communication.

The discussion has argued for the critical role of social workers in policy practice. While social work practitioners are crucial in policy practice, their impact remains limited due to challenges in engaging with policy processes. These barriers include a lack of training in policy advocacy, administrative overload, and institutional disempowerment. Chibonore and Chikadzi (2017) argue that most social workers often have heavy caseloads and extensive administrative duties which keep them busy and occupied throughout, thus leaving minimal to no time for them to engage in policy-related activities such as monitoring, evaluation, or advocacy. Additionally, most institutions are unaware of social workers' key roles, which affects their involvement in policy practice, as they are often not consulted. The NFMIP, as a guideline for municipal indigent policy formulation, does not acknowledge the importance of social workers by including them in the policy process.

Ebeleshe (2024) posits that although social workers have expertise in working with communities, conducting needs assessments, and finding solutions to problems, their lack of adequate knowledge and skills significantly constrains their ability to influence and practice policy. As a result, most social work practitioners are ill-equipped to engage in policy practice fully. Therefore, there is a need to address these barriers so that social workers can confidently engage in social policy practice. These barriers can be overcome by encouraging practitioners to upskill through continuous professional development.

2.4. Theoretical Framework

Nancy Fraser's social justice theory underpinned this study. The researchers believe that this theory is the bedrock of how a socially just community can be constructed in the context of indigent service delivery. Kuhlengisa et al. (2022) posit that social justice is premised on the assumption that everyone is equal and should be treated as such. This entails access to equal economic, social, and political rights and opportunities. The absence of social justice perpetuates social inequalities (Fraser, 2008). According to Fraser (2009), the social

justice theory is based on three perspectives: recognition, redistribution, and representation. In this context, recognition entails the cultural domain, redistribution entails economic distribution, and representation regards the political setting of the society. This study examined the role played by social workers in ensuring the recognition, effective redistribution of resources, and representation of indigents during the implementation of indigent policy.

The first precondition, as identified by Fraser, relates to recognition, and in most instances, indigents, especially those living in rural areas, are unrecognised (Kuhlengisa et al., 2022). Fraser (2013) argues that not being recognised entails looking down upon someone or devaluing people and denying their status as a full partner in social interaction. Therefore, social workers should play a crucial role in ensuring that indigents are afforded the status of full partners in social interaction. The recognition of indigents has implications for how they are represented and treated at all levels of society.

The second precondition in Fraser's social justice theory is redistribution, which deals with the existing economic injustices (Kuhlengisa et al., 2022). In line with Fraser's framework, Marian et al. (2014) note that economic injustices can refer to the inequitable distribution of resources within society and the adverse effects of maldistribution. In line with this, it is imperative that municipalities address all forms of economic injustices. Therefore, this entails the need for social workers to advocate for and facilitate the equitable delivery of indigent support to a community's most vulnerable members.

The final precondition in Fraser's social justice theory regards participatory parity, which aligns with the need for social workers to facilitate engagement between indigent communities and local authorities.

Based on these, social workers can empower indigents by actively participating in the decision-making process related to indigent policy formulation and implementation. Using the lens of social justice theory, social workers can assist in the creation of a more just society where indigents can participate fully and equally in the sociopolitical and economic landscape. This study opted to use Fraser's social justice theory because it offers a comprehensive framework for analysing the implementation of the indigent policy in South Africa. Fraser (2008) provides a tridimensional model of social justice, arguing that social justice can be achieved through redistribution, recognition, and representation, thus making it suitable to discuss policy design and implementation within South Africa's post-apartheid context, which is characterised by systemic poverty, marginalisation, and exclusion. Fraser's framework was

applied as an analytical lens to understand social workers' involvement in developing and implementing the indigent policy in South Africa.

The condition of redistribution guided the assessment of the allocation of financial resources to the indigents within the policy frameworks in the BCMM, while representation informed the analysis of the participatory strategies in policy design and implementation to assess whose voices or views are included in shaping the indigent policy. The study evaluated the extent to which indigents and social workers are included or excluded from the policy-making process and governance structure. The condition of recognition guided the analysis of how the BCMM's indigent policy acknowledges the status-based injustices encountered by indigents.

By grounding this study in Fraser's social justice theory, it sought to explore and analyse the implementation of the indigent policy, how it addresses the deeper patterns of socioeconomic disparities in South Africa and the implications for social workers in policy practice.

3. Methodology

The study utilised a qualitative research approach to assess social workers' roles in implementing indigent policies in South Africa. Aspers and Corte (2019) posit that a qualitative research approach is a multimethod focus which involves a naturalistic approach to the subject under investigation. The study used a case study research design, using the BCMM as a case study. Thomas (2021) states that a research design is a study's data gathering, measurement, and analysis plan. The BCMM has a population of 858,000 and includes the towns of East London, Macleantown, Bisho, and King Williams Town (BCMM Annual Report, 2022). The municipality also covers townships such as Mdantsane, Zwelitsha, Phakamisa, and Sweetwaters (BCMM Integrated Development Plan, 2021). More than half of the people residing within the municipal jurisdiction (467,000) are indigents, yet only 83,000 benefit from indigent support (BCMM Annual Report, 2023).

Data for this study was collected using secondary sources, allowing the researcher to analyse and interpret documents to understand the research problem. This study used Scopus, Google Scholar, Sabinet, and Web of Science databases to search for relevant social work and policy practice articles, ensuring comprehensive coverage. Additionally, a systematic search strategy was developed to search for the relevant articles using keywords and phrases such as

“indigent policy South Africa,” “social workers in policy practice,” “municipal indigent policy South Africa,” “social work and indigent support,” “social work and policy development,” and “role of social workers in policy practice.” The documents selected were screened for inclusion in the study based on their titles and abstracts, which were subsequently subjected to a full-text review to assess their relevance for the study. Documents that met the study’s inclusion criteria were reviewed, and relevant information was extracted to support the presented arguments. Table 4 below provides the inclusion and exclusion criteria for selecting the documents.

Table 4

The inclusion and exclusion criteria for documents used in the study

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Date	Government Documents must have been published between 2003 and 2025.	Any government document published before 2003 was considered irrelevant.
	Journal Articles must have been published between 2019 and 2025.	Journal articles that did not fall within the last five years.
	Books must have been published between 2015 and 2025.	Books published more than 10 years ago.
Topic	Documents regarding municipal indigent policies.	Indigent documents not related to municipalities and not directly related to qualitative research.
	Documents regarding public policy.	
	Documents regarding social work roles and theories.	
Language	Document regarding social justice.	
	Sources written in English.	Non-English sources.
	Peer-reviewed journal articles.	Conference proceedings.
Publication	Grey literature, i.e., annual reports, strategic plans, and IDPs.	Non-peer-reviewed journals.
	Published books.	

Source: Researcher’s Construction, 2025

Before utilising such documents in this study, the researcher had a responsibility to assess whether the producers of such documents were reliable sources to ensure the trustworthiness of the results. All the documents used in this study were considered credible and reliable, and this study’s results are, therefore, deemed trustworthy.

Table 5*Secondary sources and their credibility*

Secondary data collection method	Description and credibility of the sources
Published Printed Sources	The researcher only used documents published by reliable and well-known publishers in 2015.
Books	These are the most authentic secondary sources.
Journals	These are reliable and up-to-date, providing data about a specific subject. The researcher utilised accredited journals as sources.
e-Journal	These were more readily available than printed journals. They are deemed credible as they are peer-reviewed.
Government Sources (IDP, Annual Reports, Indigent Policies)	These are considered reliable as only audited documents were employed.
Stats SA Documents	These provided a situational analysis and information regarding the population and other socioeconomic variables required for this study.

Source: Researcher's Own Construction, 2025

Using secondary data helped the researcher understand the research problem in depth and draw conclusions from the findings of similar studies by other scholars. In the context of this study, data were gathered from the BCMM's annual reports, IDPs, annual performance plans, and indigent support policy, as well as the NFMIP, Stats SA documents, and research articles.

Furthermore, the collected data was analysed using thematic analysis, and the researcher followed the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012). The first step involved becoming familiar with the data by reading through the data sets. The researcher conducted a vigorous reading of the data, which allowed for critical thinking. The second step was the generation of codes, which was done by employing line-by-line coding through an open coding technique, meaning the codes were not preset. However, codes were developed and modified as the coding process progressed. During the third step, the preliminary themes were developed, and at this stage, the researcher developed a list of potential themes and associated subthemes. These potential themes were identified by analysing the coded data to identify patterns among the codes generated. The fourth stage involved reviewing potential themes, ensuring that the themes answered the research questions. The fifth stage involved defining and naming the themes, ensuring that each theme had a single focus. The final stage was

producing a report which provided a compelling story about the role of social work in implementing indigent policies in South Africa.

4. Findings and Discussion

The study used the BCMM as a case study to examine social workers' roles in designing and implementing indigent policies in South Africa. The study utilised a qualitative research approach and a case study design. The data was collected using secondary sources and analysed using thematic analysis. The study has revealed that the engagement of social workers in indigent policy design and implementation is very low, and this exclusion of social workers has led to limited advocacy for indigent policy change, failure to build effective coalitions, indigents' lack of awareness regarding the policy, and the exclusion of more deserving people in accessing indigent support, resulting in several indigents being left behind in accessing basic services, further perpetuating inequality and poverty.

Theme 1: Limited advocacy for indigent policy change

The study explored the extent to which social workers advocate for changes in policies affecting low-income individuals within the BCMM. This investigation included an examination of the barriers that prevent social workers from actively participating in advocacy efforts and how these barriers contribute to their limited involvement in policy outcomes. This study has revealed that limited advocacy for indigent policy change is attributed to a lack of institutional support that hinders society from advocating for indigent policy change. According to the BCMM's indigent policy (2023), the municipal service department, finance department, municipal manager, free basic services management team, ward councillors, Community Development Workers and indigent households are involved in indigent policies, which is in line with those identified in the NFMIP (2003). Notably, social workers are not included as main actors in indigent policy development and implementation as a result of poor networking and inadequate coordination, which prevents the relevant actors from recognising and acknowledging the vital role that social workers play in addressing policy issues.

The data analysis revealed that social workers do not directly engage in indigent policy advocacy, which negatively affects these policies as they lack crucial insights from social workers. Carrilho and Branco (2023) note a low level of engagement in policy practice activities among social workers. Chibonore and Chikadzi (2017) attribute this lack of social

workers' involvement in policy practice in South Africa to large caseloads, underfunding, resource-poor organisations, and a lack of institutional support mechanisms. These findings indicate that the social work profession is underrepresented in public policy matters in South Africa, thus limiting its visibility and influence in indigent policy development and implementation.

Having limited advocacy for social workers' role in indigent policy design can be catastrophic, as it may result in the development of ineffective policies where indigents are excluded from accessing essential support and services. This study's findings on social workers' limited advocacy in the formulation and implementation of indigent policies and their effects correlate with the literature, which argues that the absence of advocacy for policy change engenders the violation of human rights (Spitzer & Twikirize, 2014; Manyama & Mvungi, 2017). Magadze et al. (2020) argue that social workers' limited advocacy for policy change deviates from the social work profession's mission of protecting human rights.

Theme 2: Failure to build effective coalitions

The study investigated social workers' roles in forging a coalition within the municipality, community members, and the business community in designing and implementing indigent policies in the BCMM. In order to achieve this, documents were analysed to identify gaps in stakeholder engagement within indigent policies regarding social workers, determine the institutional barriers to effective coalition building, and analyse the factors leading to successful or failed collaborations within the municipality. The data analysis revealed significant limitations on social workers' involvement in building effective coalitions within the BCMM regarding indigent policy design and implementation. Kuhlengisa et al. (2024) argue that the NFMIP does not explicitly mention social workers as key actors in the indigent policy process.

Ngarava's (2023) study findings indicate that municipal officials, political office bearers, and community development workers are the main actors in the indigent policy process. Rulashe and Ijeoma (2022) argue that politicians and municipal officials tend to drive policy design and implementation within the BCMM. Kuhlengisa (2024), in his study on the applicability of the NFMIP in different municipalities in South Africa, notes that within the BCMM, the design and implementation of the indigent policy is mainly driven by the

municipality's finance department, with limited to no input from social workers or the Department of Social Development.

The BCMM's indigent policy (2023) clearly indicates that within the municipality, its institutional setup for developing and implementing indigent policies does not consider social workers as key stakeholders, as they are not involved in the free basic services technical team. This has negative implications for the effective implementation of indigent policies. This failure to build an effective coalition between social workers and municipalities may result in poor communication of policy benefits and indigent requirements. For Chibonore and Chikadzi (2017), a lack of partnerships among professionals and organisations impedes effective policy advocacy. As such, the lack of partnership between municipalities and social workers affects the involvement of social workers in indigent policy implementation within the BCMM, negatively impacting the effectiveness and efficiency of the policy's implementation.

The findings correlate with Kuhlengisa et al. (2024), who found that a lack of coalition within the BCMM negatively affects the effectiveness of the indigent policy. Thus, a coalition between the municipality and social workers must be promoted as it allows social workers to engage in debates that eventually lead to resolutions that ensure effective policy implementation.

Theme 3: The indigents lack awareness regarding the policy

The study assessed the role of social workers in raising awareness of the indigent policy within the municipality. In order to achieve this, grey literature was reviewed, including municipal annual reports, strategic management plans, integrated development plans, and communication strategies employed by the BCMM to communicate with indigents about the policy. In addition, the pamphlets and circulars that the BCMM had distributed to inform indigents about the policy were analysed and compared to estimate eligible citizens and those who registered for support to determine potential awareness gaps. The data analysis revealed that social workers play an insignificant role in raising awareness about indigent support within the municipality, leading to many qualifying indigents not applying because they do not know about the indigent policy.

The BCMM uses posters, pamphlets and its website to communicate with indigents and raise awareness about the policy (BCMM Annual Report, 2023; BCMM Indigent Policy, 2023). When analysing the posters, pamphlets, and website, it was found that they use very

small fonts, making the information difficult to read. In addition, these posters and pamphlets are in black and white, negatively affecting their readability further. Many individuals in need lack access to the internet, restricting the policy's ability to reach its intended beneficiaries.

The finding aligns with Kuhlengisa's (2024) argument that within the BCMM, eligible people are not registering for indigent support because they do not know about it. This lack of awareness is attributed to ineffective communication strategies, underscoring the need for social workers' involvement in policy practice, as they are key players in conducting awareness campaigns for such public policies. This indicates a failure of social workers within the municipality to make indigents aware of the benefits of indigent policies. According to the literature, social workers are pivotal in raising awareness regarding a specific issue or policy (Dhavaleshwar & Banasode, 2017; Nyahunda et al., 2021). Sayers (2006) posits that one of the social workers' roles in policy practice is to conduct awareness campaigns to sensitise the targeted audience to specific issues and bridge the knowledge gap on a particular issue, thereby providing the correct message to the target audience. The limited role played by social workers in raising awareness regarding indigent policies has negative implications for reducing inequality gaps and alleviating poverty, as it leads to most of those living in poverty not applying for indigent support because they are not aware of the policy.

Theme 4: People living in dire poverty are being left out of accessing indigent services

The study assessed social workers' roles towards ensuring that all the people living in dire poverty have access to basic services stipulated by the BCMM's indigent policy. In order to achieve this, various documents, such as annual reports, indigent policies, IDPs, and strategic plans, were analysed to ascertain social workers' involvement in verifying indigents' applications and determining indigent qualification criteria. The analysis revealed that social workers do not partake in the indigent verification process and in determining indigent qualification criteria, leaving deserving people behind in accessing indigent services. According to Amathole District Municipality's indigent policy (2023), indigent verification is the sole responsibility of ward committees rather than trained social workers who could provide a comprehensive assessment.

The finding correlates with Kuhlengisa (2024), who notes that within the BCMM, deserving indigents are left behind in accessing indigent support because beneficiaries are

selected on political party lines since ward councillors are responsible for verifying beneficiaries. According to the BCMM's indigent policy (2023), for one to qualify, they must own the property they are living on, have a South African identity card, and provide proof that they are living in poverty. These stringent qualification criteria lead to the exclusion of indigent backroom dwellers, foreigners, and those who do not have documents to prove that they live in poverty. Scholars have argued that stringent qualification criteria, as stipulated in indigent policies, exclude deserving citizens from accessing indigent support services (Leburu, 2017; Ruiters, 2018).

The exclusion of social workers in verifying indigents and determining the qualifying criteria is a cause for concern since they are qualified to do so. Lamponen and Aarnio (2024) argue that social workers are highly trained to comprehensively assess indigent households, considering financial criteria and psychosocial factors contributing to poverty. Therefore, they are the most suitable individuals to conduct assessments for indigent support. This assessment can be done through home visits (Lukelelo, 2023). In the context of indigent policies, municipalities should recognise the value of social workers who conduct home visits as part of the indigent verification process, which plays an active role in verifying indigent applicants' living conditions.

The study found that the engagement of social workers in indigent policy design and implementation is very low, and their exclusion has led to limited advocacy for indigent policy change, failure to build effective coalitions, indigents' lack of awareness regarding the policy, and the exclusion of more deserving people from accessing indigent support. These findings contradict Fraser's theory of social justice. The exclusion of social workers in indigent policy design and implementation presents a failure of recognition at various levels, as their professional knowledge and skills are unutilised in addressing poverty-related issues. The exclusion of social workers in indigent policy design and implementation has a negative implication for redistribution.

This exclusion has led to the misallocation of resources and the failure of indigent support to reach those most in need. For example, some South African municipalities, such as the Amathole District Municipality and Ngqushwa Local Municipality, do not have an office dedicated to indigent support and lack the human resources for indigent policy implementation (Kuhlengisa, 2024). As a result, most indigent applicants often encounter limited support when they visit municipalities for registration, resulting in limited access to services.

Additionally, this study argues that a lack of social workers' involvement in the indigent policy design has led to it focusing solely on distributing free basic services without addressing the socioeconomic factors perpetuating poverty and inequality. The lack of indigent policy awareness is directly linked to participatory parity since unawareness impedes participation. Hence, the lack of recognition of social workers' expertise in indigent policy design and implementation has resulted in inadequate redistribution strategies hindering indigents' ability to participate fully within society.

Notably, the themes are not independent of each other. The limited advocacy for policy change (theme 1) will likely weaken the ability to build effective coalitions (theme 2). Without these strong coalitions among key stakeholders, indigent citizens remain unaware of the policy (theme 3). As a result, the 'poorest of the poor' will be systematically left out of accessing indigent services (theme 4). The study findings highlight that the failure to build effective coalitions and the lack of awareness of the indigent policy among indigent populations are not isolated challenges but interdependent deficiencies that require immediate attention. Building an effective coalition requires involving social work practitioners as key stakeholders in the indigent policy process. These social workers will work effectively as agents for raising community awareness of the indigent policy since awareness campaigns are a part of their professional efforts to educate communities, influence public attitudes, and empower vulnerable populations.

5. Implications and Recommendations for the Study

The study has revealed that the BCMM's indigent policy, in its current format, is still far from achieving social justice. Municipal officials, social workers, and academics must grapple with several emerging issues to ensure that no one in need is excluded from accessing free basic services. Social workers must play an active role in all stages of the indigent policy cycle to ensure that everyone has access to basic services and that poverty and inequality are alleviated.

In dealing with limited advocacy for indigent policy change, the study recommends that the provincial Department of Social Development encourage social workers to collaborate with different government spheres (national, provincial, and local), allowing for a comprehensive approach to indigent policy development and implementation. In addition, the study recommends that the BCMM establish formal mechanisms to enable public deliberations

in developing and implementing indigent policies and allow social workers to facilitate these processes.

Another challenge noted in this study is the failure to build effective coalitions. In this regard, this study recommends that the BCMM prioritise the creation of advocacy networks through facilitating coalitions between municipal elected officials and appointed officials, community organisations, social workers, the business community, and other stakeholders to enable an amplified collective voice in indigent policy advocacy. The BCMM should create an environment that encourages social workers to build strong relationships with communities, as this may provide them with a clear mandate to advocate on the indigent population's behalf. In addressing indigents' lack of awareness regarding the policy, the study recommends that the BCMM make effective use of ward committees, community development workers (CDWs) and other community organisations as indigent policy information disseminators, whilst social workers should play a critical role in training and coordinating these groups and making sure that adequate information is shared. Effective campaigns should be launched, with social workers playing pivotal roles in designing and implementing such campaigns, ensuring culturally appropriate and effective messaging.

The study further found that deserving people living in dire poverty are being excluded from accessing indigent services due to the lack of social workers' input into the indigent policy process. In dealing with the above challenge, the study recommends that social workers play a vital role in helping the BCMM design user-friendly application processes that make services accessible to those in dire poverty. In addition, the BCMM should develop mobile social worker staff units to reach remote or underserved areas, facilitating on-site indigent registration. Social workers should establish a case management approach to provide continuous support and ensure uninterrupted access to free basic services for indigents. Social workers should also play a crucial role in building capacity within the municipality, with ward councillors and municipal officials being trained to identify and support indigents.

6. Conclusion

The study used social justice theory and a qualitative research approach to examine the role of social workers in designing and implementing municipal indigent policies in South Africa, focusing on the BCMM as a case study. The study found that social workers are

excluded from participating in designing and implementing indigent policies in the BCMM, which has led to limited advocacy for indigent policy change, the municipality's failure to build effective coalitions, indigents' lack of awareness regarding the support available, and the exclusion of deserving people from accessing indigent support.

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