



SAWID

**“Social Workers as
Champions of Change”**

Design Workshop Report



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SAWID's "Social Workers as Champions of Change" Design Workshop Report

On 15 May 2025, SAWID hosted a *Social Workers as Champions of Change* design workshop in Room 5 of the Kgorong Building of UNISA's Muckleneuk Campus, gathering around 40 social workers, government officials, academics, development practitioners and other key stakeholders.

1. The stated purpose and objectives of the event were the following:

- To find feminist solutions to the seemingly intractable problems of poverty, racism, family incapacity and societal violence, as well as inter-generational trauma related to historical inequalities
- To explore social work models of human development
- To spearhead the creation of a pod or package of Social Work skills to both create employment for unemployed social workers and create social work capacity for individuals and communities
- To transform social work practice in the country
- To increase the agency of African Women and expand their thought leadership in the world

2. Historical Background and Context

SAWID, a 22-year-old women's organisation, with the mission of representing the voices of women on all platforms where decisions are made that impact their lives, has had a long engagement with the issue of psycho-social interventions and social work engagement in families.

At the first SAWID Annual Dialogue in 2003, women identified poverty in cities and rural areas as a major stumbling block to their ability to be agents of their own development. A study tour to Chile and Tunisia in 2006 to study successful poverty eradication strategies in two of the only countries who had managed to halve poverty by then indicated the need for psycho-social family interventions, by social workers, and dedicated funds to help families graduate from poverty.

SAWID and its sister organisation, WDB Trust, have piloted a model first seen in Chile that recruits, trains and employs young men and women to enter families with a basket of services. This model, which began as SAWID's Development Caravan action learning approach, was taken over by WDB Trust in 2014 as their Zenzele model, linked to a micro-credit component based on the successful Bangladeshi Grameen Bank micro-finance institution founded by Muhammad Yunus.

A brain-storming session convened by SAWID on February 21, 2024, addressed the issue that, according to a November 2023 Parliamentary Monitoring Group presentation, 9000 social workers in South Africa were unemployed in a country with a high need for social work capacity and intervention.

The women present at the brainstorming session sought to understand how to use existing resources to help society transform for the better, and advance the interests of women, given the dire socio-economic situation in the country, and the breakdown of the family. They concluded that there is a need for a database of retired social workers, and to explore ways in which social workers can participate in the economy meaningfully, be integrated into the business world or private sector, and capitalize on such an initiative to deliver both employment to, and ensure the economic contributions by, social workers.

The workshop commenced with an opening message from facilitator, Sawidian and psychologist **Ms Ntsiki Sisulu** (Head of Department, Gauteng Department of Community Safety), who urged participants to refocus their energy on the purpose of the gathering to reposition social workers as champions of change amidst current social ills. Ms Sisulu stressed the necessity of building networks for women in the field and underscored the importance of embodying change to catalyse transformation across the nation. She reminded attendees that social work is inherently about “power and change,” and called upon social workers to reclaim their agency.

SAWID Operations and Partnerships Manager, **Ms Marthe Muller**, said a prayer honouring SAWID’s multi-faith focus, and provided a moment of collective reflection to set the tone for the day’s engagements.

Professor Khanyisile Mbatha of the UNISA Women’s Forum officially opened the workshop by acknowledging the stakeholders in the room and introducing the key theme, feminist collaboration to address the critical issue of over 9,000 unemployed social workers in South Africa. She posed the vital question: “How will we drive change?” and declared the formal opening of the “Social Workers as Champions of Change” initiative.

Ms Sisulu emphasised the need for social workers to view themselves as catalysts for change, highlighting that social work is fundamentally rooted in power, purpose, and transformation. She urged the creation of networks through which social workers could pivot personal transformation into societal change.

Ms Vatiswa Moea (Executive Director, SAWID) outlined the objectives of the workshop, offering a sobering reflection on the current unsustainability of social development work in South Africa. She acknowledged the collective fatigue felt by many in the sector and stressed the need for measurable gains. Ms Moea proposed the creation of a national think tank to design impactful strategies and facilitate cross-sector collaboration.

Drawing on historical context, she referenced the 2003 SAWID Dialogue which identified poverty as a fundamental issue impeding development. She reinforced that “as long as a woman is hungry, nothing is going to move.” Additionally, she cited the 2006 Chile and Tunisia Poverty Eradication Tour and Study, which demonstrated that eradicating poverty requires sustained psycho-social development driven by trained social workers, and continuous funding. The WDB Trust Zenzele model, which built upon SAWID’s Development Caravan action learning approach, which was piloted across three provinces, deployed trained social workers overseeing a cadre of social auxiliary workers, and this model was presented as a blueprint for sustained social transformation.

A key recommendation from SAWID’s brainstorming session in February 2024 was the creation of a **national database of unemployed and retired social workers**, aimed at integrating them into the socio-economic ecosystem through a scalable service model. This would serve as a foundation for a scalable model of social work services. However, it was noted that while SAWID lacks the resources to implement programmes directly, its strength lies in mobilization and convening. The workshop sought to co-create a roadmap that could be piloted, refined, and ultimately scaled.

Ms Moea reiterated that contributions from participants would help shape a practical and tangible blueprint aimed at leveraging untapped social work capacity which could be used to bridge service delivery gaps to benefit underserved communities.

3. Presentation: Social Workers as Champions of Change

Ms Ntjantja Ned (Founder and Managing Director, Doubledened In-Development Enterprises NPO) delivered a powerful keynote, reflecting on her journey into social work, which began at the age of eight when she first saw a social worker with her own car visiting her school in Matatiele. She asked the woman what she did for a living and the woman told her that she was a social worker who ensured that some children who did not have adequate food would receive food. Ntjantja wondered why it was only meant to benefit some children, and not other children like herself, and determined that she would become a social worker who would benefit all children equally. She emphasized that true champions are driven by passion, purpose, and the values of service and community. "If it does not drive you, then you can't promote change," she asserted.

Drawing from her experience, including work with the UN and the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, she described social workers as mirrors of society whose integrity and visibility shape future generations. She encouraged participants to shift their mindsets and take ownership of community change, rather than waiting for government-led initiatives. "We are the ones we've been waiting for," she affirmed, calling for the revival of community-based leadership and intergenerational empowerment.

She challenged universities and training institutions to align their social work curricula with real-world conditions, urging a focus on empowering graduates to engage with communities, identify challenges, and co-create solutions. Champions, she argued, are not defined by qualifications, but by their persistence, associations, and willingness to sacrifice for the collective good.

4. Presentation: Academic and Policy Perspective

Professor Paul Mbedzi (Head of Social Work at UNISA and President of the Council for Social Service Professions) delivered a technical presentation on the regulatory and professional development dimensions of social work in South Africa. He noted that although 45,000 social workers are currently registered with the Council, the scale of social ills in the country calls for significantly broader coverage.

To address barriers to entry, he announced that unemployed social workers may register without paying a fee, a measure designed to reduce administrative hurdles and facilitate access to professional support. He urged all stakeholders to reimagine social work education to align with today's social issues, including climate change, technological disruption, and entrenched poverty. Professor Mbedzi argued that social work must embrace leadership, agility, and advocacy, thus asserting that policies need to be more adaptable, curricula more relevant, and interventions more community-led.

Professor Mbedzi called for curriculum reforms to meet the demands of contemporary society and highlighted the urgent need for policy flexibility. He emphasised that social workers must be at the forefront of policy influence and adaptation, especially in light of rapid technological changes and increasing societal pressures. Social workers, he stated, "must articulate, speak up, and speak out on the constant change in humanity and be bold on vocal solutions."

He reaffirmed that social work leadership is inherently selfless and must continue to challenge complacency by responding with innovative and contextual solutions. The profession must embrace intergenerational leadership, continuous development, and accountability by ethical standards.

5. Presentation: Perspectives on Transformative Practice

Ms Sibongile Mkhabela (Executive Director of the Barloworld Empowerment Foundation) explored transformative initiatives in social work, warning against over-reliance on government structures for community change. She identified a gap in leadership at the grassroots level and encouraged the audience to focus on practice, not just theory. "Social work is not only a profession but also an art and a science," she explained, advocating for a shift in how social workers view themselves as agents of change.

Sharing her experience in launching community-driven foundations, Ms Mkhabela stressed that sustainable impact stems from enabling communities to lead their own development, even in the absence of external funding. She cautioned against adopting foreign models that fail to account for South Africa's specific traumas and socio-cultural realities. She also critiqued past institutional labels like "AIDS Village," highlighting the importance of language in preserving dignity and reframing narratives.

She urged participants to shift from problem identification to solution-orientation, leveraging the collective experience of 9,000 unemployed social workers to ignite community-level transformation. Social workers, she argued, are inherently problem solvers who must now work proactively and prepare society for challenges it has not yet faced.

6. Presentations: Case Studies

As part of the engagement process, three key case studies were presented during the session. Each case offered valuable insight into models and frameworks that could be adapted and integrated into the national recognition and support of social workers. These case studies emphasized community-rooted approaches, data-driven methodologies, and sustainable wellness practices that promote national development and social protection.

6.1 The Zenzele Model

Presented by Ms Nomzamo Ndimande, who presented the presentation of Ms. Sibongiseni Malokoane (Social Worker and Programme Director, WDB Trust) who had a medical emergency.

The Zenzele Model, a flagship program under the WDB Trust, exemplifies a transformative approach to community development and economic empowerment. Grounded in the principles of self-reliance, unity, and sustainability, the Zenzele Model is designed to move communities away from dependency on institutional donors and toward long-term, self-sustaining systems.

6.1.1 Key Insights:

- The WDB Trust operates primarily in rural communities to address poverty and support women-led development.
- Social workers are deployed as field workers who conduct comprehensive community profiling.
- Programs follow **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs** to ensure layered, sustainable interventions - from psycho-social support to economic empowerment.
- The Zenzele model leverages **the MME reporting tool**, which provides real-time data and a beneficiary dashboard for continuous improvement, impact measurement, and knowledge-sharing.

6.1.2 Application to the Project:

This model offers a scalable template for integrating social workers in grassroots development, using data and community profiling to align support with real-world needs. It also highlights how social workers can play a pivotal role in building household-level productivity, job creation, and social cohesion.

6.2 Social Work and Employee Wellness

Presented by Ms. Sixolile Ngcobo (Founder, Well Health Company). Ms. Ngcobo shared her personal and professional journey to highlight how social workers can reimagine their roles within communities and the private sector. Following organisational closure in 2014, she pivoted toward employee wellness as a social justice initiative.

6.2.1 Key Insights:

Wellness is not just for large corporations, smaller community-based wellness programs can be impactful and necessary.

Mental health care remains inaccessible to many as social workers can serve as vital mental health advocates and first responders within their communities.

Existing structures like **EAPA-SA** offer accredited designations and frameworks for occupational social work and employee assistance programs.

6.2.2 Application to the Project:

Social workers must explore income-generating opportunities grounded in community needs – from addressing GBV to building mental health networks and promoting holistic well-being. Upskilling in the context of today's economy means utilizing one's hands, mind, and lived community experience to design impactful interventions.

6.3 Wakamoso: Data-Driven Community Solutions

Presented by Dr. Melani Prinsloo, Director, Centre for Democratizing Information. Wakamoso, meaning “The Future One,” is a data-centric model aimed at democratizing information in marginalized communities. The approach reframes how data is collected, interpreted, and applied in community development - ensuring that communities are not rendered invisible in the future due to a lack of representation in data systems.

6.3.1 Key Insights:

- Focuses on capturing and analyzing data from low-income and underserved areas. Connects social worker profiles (via digital CVs) with community needs, enabling **skills mapping** and strategic deployment.
- Helps distinguish between **job creation** and **income generation**, with an emphasis on micro-jobs that are compensated based on actions and impact.
- Aims to link **digital infrastructure** with real-time, community-facing challenges such as GBV, addiction, displacement, and mental health crises.

6.3.2 Application to the Project:

This model presents a groundbreaking opportunity to integrate real-time data, incident reporting, and community intelligence into national planning. By aligning social worker profiles with specific community issues, a system can be developed to match expertise with need, facilitating targeted intervention and improved public resource allocation.

7. Breakaway Sessions: Toward a Blueprint for Action

The breakaway sessions allowed participants to engage in in-depth discussions following the case study presentations. The breakaway sessions were conducted around the following three topics:

7.1. The priority issues in society today, requiring social work capacity that can be gathered in a family and community social development services catalogue.

The group discussion highlighted several urgent social issues that demand strengthened social work capacity, to be captured within a national catalogue for family and community social development services. A key concern is the limited reach of broader psycho-social services, which often do not extend into households. There is a pressing need for personalised, community-based approaches that provide direct support to families.

7. 1.1 Key Priorities Identified:

- Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and its root causes
- Substance abuse and addiction
- Homelessness and its intersections with GBV
- Family dysfunction and lack of parenting support
- Mental health awareness and stigma reduction
- School-based social services to address inequality and behavioural issues
- Rehabilitation and reintegration of former offenders

Gender-based violence (GBV) emerged as a top priority. Participants stressed the need to address not only the manifestations of GBV but also its root causes, symptoms, and the socio-economic conditions that contribute to it. Addiction and substance abuse are closely linked and require an integrated approach to prevention and treatment. Homelessness, another critical issue, is both a consequence and a contributor to GBV and addiction, and must be addressed within the broader social services framework.

Family well-being and parenting skills were identified as foundational to community stability. Many social challenges stem from a lack of effective parenting and family support structures. Mental health was also prioritised, with a strong call to raise awareness, promote accessible support systems, and destigmatise seeking help. There is a need to develop culturally aligned, decolonised solutions that reflect community values and lived experiences.

Schools were emphasised as key sites of intervention. Currently, teachers are often burdened with addressing social issues alongside their teaching responsibilities. The integration of school-based social workers is essential to tackle problems such as bullying, inequality, and emotional distress among learners. Each school should have a dedicated social worker to ensure a supportive learning environment.

Finally, the rehabilitation and reintegration of former offenders was raised as a vital area needing greater social work support. This includes responding to the trauma of both offenders and victims, and creating pathways that reduce re-offending through community reintegration and support. Social workers must play an active role in building these systems of support and resilience.

7.2 How best can the initiative be funded and funding models to be considered

The group discussed potential funding models to support the development of a sustainable platform aimed at placing and upskilling unemployed social workers. Recognising social work as a skilled profession requiring ongoing development, the key funding priority is the creation of an up-to-date online platform or app, intellectually owned by SAWID that facilitates registration, training, and placement of social workers.

7.2.1 Funding Needs:

The primary funding requirement is to develop and maintain a user-friendly, up-to-date digital platform or mobile app where unemployed social workers can register, update their profiles, and access training and employment opportunities. This platform would serve not only as a tool for professional development but also as a means of collecting and managing data ethically and securely. Additional funding would support the provision of continuous upskilling initiatives tailored to the needs of different communities. These programmes would prepare social workers for meaningful roles within their local contexts while also enhancing their employability. Ensuring proper data governance and ethical protection of sensitive user information is another critical aspect that would require financial investment, particularly with the involvement of regulatory stakeholders.

Moreover, funding would also enable broader outreach and community engagement efforts to integrate unemployed social workers into existing wellness and development frameworks.

7.2.2 Potential Funding Sources and Stakeholders:

- **SETA (Sector Education and Training Authorities)** - including Social Work and related sectors
- **Department of Social Development** - existing database and potential partner
- **National Skills Fund**
- **Information Regulator** - to ensure data protection and compliance
- **Council for Social Work Professions** - potential host for the platform and partner in upskilling
- **Corporate Social Investment (CSI) Funds** - such as Prime Media's "Corporates that Care"
- **Academic Institutions** - including UNISA and others for curriculum development and research
- **IDC (Industrial Development Corporation)** - possible funder for co-operatives of social workers
- **Hlanganisa Community Fund & NDA (National Development Agency)**
- **Community Development Workers** - as field-level implementers
- **Municipal Partners** - e.g. Tshwane Municipality Training and Leadership Academy
- **Unjani Clinics Model** - as a reference for scalable, community-based services
- **Alumni Networks** - such as the South African Social Workers Association Alumni

7.2.3 Strategic Considerations:

Strategically, the initiative aims to start by empowering the 9,000 currently unemployed social workers and turning them into valuable assets within their communities. A key consideration is the importance of leveraging existing systems and partnerships, described as "ukukwezela" building upon what is already in motion rather than starting from scratch. To ensure the effectiveness of the initiative, unregistered and unemployed social workers should be encouraged to formally register with the Council for Social Work Professions, enabling proper tracking, support, and placement.

Empower the 9,000 identified unemployed social workers, integrate them as active assets in their communities, and establish a self-sustaining funding and operational model to drive long-term social impact.

7.3 Sourcing, upskilling and technology for placing the unemployed social workers.

The discussion emphasised the vital role of technology in addressing the growing unemployment crisis among social workers. A key proposal is the development and usage of digital systems and databases where unemployed social workers can create dynamic, updatable profiles containing their CVs, qualifications, and skills. These digital profiles would serve as professional assets, enabling better matching of social workers to specific community needs.

7.3.1 A Step-by-Step Model for Application:

7.3.1.1 Community Research and Audits:

Begin by identifying the most urgent social issues in each community ranging from GBV and addiction to mental health and parenting challenges. This audit should ideally be led by unemployed social workers to ensure full community engagement and provide first-hand insights.

7.3.1.1 Profiling Unemployed Social Workers:

Create a digital database where social workers can upload dynamic, updatable CVs, detailing their skills, qualifications, experience, and location. This enables better matching between community needs and available professionals.

7.3.1.2 Analyse Gaps and Provide Targeted Training:

Use audit data and profile insights to identify skill shortages. Offer upskilling opportunities especially in areas such as trauma care, school-based interventions, or offender reintegration to ensure social workers are equipped to meet specific local challenges.

7.3.1.3 Communication and Resource Platform:

Develop a mobile or web-based hub where social workers can share job opportunities, access training resources, and exchange knowledge. This space would also promote mentorship, peer support, and professional development.

7.3.1.4 Promoting Income Generation Over Job Dependency:

Move beyond a purely employment-focused model. Incorporate training in entrepreneurship, finance, and digital service delivery so social workers can develop sustainable, self-driven income streams reducing reliance on state-funded roles.

This approach draws inspiration from existing systems like the Zenzele Model and Wakamoso platform, which have already successfully profiled thousands of individuals and supported placements. By adapting these models for the social work sector, the project aims to build a real-time, interactive database that connects trained professionals with targeted interventions. The technology will not only support job placement but also drive systemic change by integrating unemployed social workers directly into community development.

Ultimately, this solution strengthens the social work ecosystem by transforming how professionals are trained, deployed, and empowered. It creates an inclusive system where social workers become active agents of change, while also ensuring their own economic sustainability through digital tools and innovative service delivery models.

8. Discussion Outcomes:

8.1 Community Profiling and Ownership: There was strong consensus regarding the need for localized data to inform decision-making and service delivery. Social workers, as community-based agents, can play a key role in this process.

8.2 Recognition and Monetization of Social Work: Discussions centred on how to formalize and fund social work contributions. Participants supported ideas like micro-job creation, community reskilling, and integrating social work into entrepreneurial ecosystems.

8.3 Integrated Wellness Models: There was a push to develop scalable wellness programs that cater to both formal and informal work sectors. A hybrid model combining mental health support, trauma intervention, and fieldwork logistics was proposed.

8.4 Leveraging Technology: Participants saw value in utilizing platforms like Wakamoso to map out skills, interventions, and needs within communities. A centralized database of social workers, linked with community statistics, was viewed as essential for future programming.

8.5 Capacity Building and Partnerships: Participants identified potential partners - including NGOs, private sector companies, and government departments - who could provide training, mentorship, and funding. There was particular interest in cross-sector collaboration that does not duplicate efforts but builds on existing strengths.

9. Three Key Outcomes:

9.1 Mapping and Mobilising Resources: Participants recommended a real-time skills audit of unemployed and retired social workers and the development of a geolocation-enabled database. A national dashboard was proposed to track deployment, services rendered, and community outcomes.

9.2 Training and Re-skilling: Delegates identified the need for short-term upskilling in areas such as digital literacy, trauma-informed care, and youth rehabilitation. Recommendations included collaboration with UNISA for accessible, modular training.

9.3 Resourcing and Stakeholder Engagement: Discussions centred on how to engage government, private sector, and civil society in co-funding and adopting social work-based interventions. The formation of a "Social Work Champions Advocacy Forum" was proposed to influence policy and funding decisions at national and provincial levels.

10. Reflections and Closing Remarks

In a closing address, **Ms Sibongile Mkhabela** (Executive Director of the Barloworld Empowerment Foundation) reflected on the complex intersections between practice, community, and identity. She urged delegates to look beyond institutional limitations and reclaim social work as a blend of science, art, and activism. "We cannot adopt models from countries that do not share our trauma," she remarked, emphasising the need for homegrown, trauma-informed solutions.

Ms Vatiswa Moea (SAWID Executive Director) encouraged all participants to continue the work initiated in the workshop by mobilising their networks, empowering their communities, and using their professional insights to build lasting social infrastructure.

The workshop concluded with a call to action from the Programme Director, **Ms Ntsiki Sisulu**, who reinforced the urgency of reimagining how social work can contribute to economic empowerment and societal resilience.

Ms Ntsiki Sisulu, closed the session by raising critical questions about the effectiveness of socio-economic empowerment programmes, noting that 50% of the national budget is allocated to such initiatives, yet poverty and dependency remain entrenched.

She reinforced the need to listen actively, understand deeply, and translate that understanding into innovative and actionable change. The workshop concluded with an invitation to all present to carry forward the energy of the day into pilot initiatives, collaborative planning, and ongoing engagement.

11. Action Items and Next Steps

- **Establish a National Database** of unemployed and retired social workers for integration into community development initiatives.
- **Develop a Pilot Blueprint** for scalable community-based social work services using insights gathered from the workshop.
- **Encourage Registration** of unemployed social workers with the Council for Social Services Professions, who have agreed to waive fees, where applicable.
- **Engage with Stakeholders** to continue collaborative dialogue and refine implementation strategies.
- **Review the Curriculum** with emerging societal needs and technological changes.
- **Promote Community-Led Initiatives** that pivot away from top-down models and that embrace self-sustaining development.

This workshop affirmed the urgent need to transform social work from a marginalised profession into a central pillar of national development. By reframing social workers as champions of change, SAWID and its partners aim to reignite hope, reshape structures, and build a more equitable society.



"We are the ones we've been waiting for..."



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