

Policy Program Paper

**Local Social Services
and Escalating Poverty**

Practice, Perceptions and Expectations

Chana Katz, Menachem Monnickendam,
Yosef Katan

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Abstract

The position, authority and knowledge that is available to the local authority social service departments allow them to be a central factor in the initiation and implementation of programs tackling poverty. This research focuses on identifying the ways that local social services department heads perceive the issue of poverty, the ways to deal with poverty, the link between these perceptions and how they perceive the departments' role in dealing with poverty, as well as the identification of existing services. The research findings show that department heads attribute poverty to a variety of causes although they stressed the individual characteristics of those who are poor. Responsibility for dealing with poverty is seen first and foremost as the responsibility of the poor person himself and then in hierarchical order, the government, the local authority and the local social departments. The majority of department heads did not perceive poverty as a social issue within their responsibility or people living in poverty as a target population, although it was found that the departments do offer assistance on an individual basis to those in their areas living in poverty.

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Executive Summary

In the past few years awareness of the necessity to deal with the problem of poverty and the need to develop programs that can be implemented to lessen it in Israel has grown. This understanding is expressed in the involvement of national level agencies including government ministries, the National Insurance Institute, Bank of Israel, the Joint Distribution Committee, foundations, national voluntary organizations, and even businesses. These agents bring together ideas and programs for dealing with poverty but sufficient attention has not been paid to the essential role of local authorities in this area.

The relationship between social work and poverty dates back to the early days of the profession of social work in the 19th century. It has been influenced over the years by the socioeconomic realities, by the status of the profession, and by the perception of social workers themselves regarding their role in addressing poverty. The rise in the extent of poverty on the one hand and the governmental methods for dealing with it on the other hand create a new reality that represents a challenge to the local social service departments in dealing with

poverty. These departments can and should be a central agent in dealing with lifting people out of poverty. Their placement, their authority and the knowledge that they have, allow them to act to coordinate and to connect the various significant agencies that work in the field.

This work throws the spotlight on the importance of the involvement of the local authority and their social service departments in the issue of poverty. Meaningful involvement is conditional on the support of various bodies, like the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services, as well as the social services and local political leadership, and the willingness of local social service department heads and their staff to deal with this issue which is largely influenced by their perceptions of the problem of poverty. Many studies have shown the existence of congruence between the perceived reasons for poverty and the programs advised for dealing with it. With this background, the current study focused on questions dealing with perceptions of poverty among local social service department heads and their attitudes regarding their department's role in dealing with it. Also examined was the link between perception of poverty of the department heads and the services they saw as most appropriate to provide the poor as well as the services actually offered by their departments.

The following are the main findings of the research:

In the area of perceptions of the reasons for poverty there is a varied picture. The heads of local social service departments perceive that poverty has multiple causes that are related to a sense of individual responsibility, to the social structure, and to government policies. They distinguished between types of poverty: chronic, the newly poor, and the working poor. They saw a connecting thread between the types of reasons for poverty anchored in the concept of "work" and its

centrality as a value and an activity. The emphasis on the characteristics of the poor themselves as a cause of poverty and as such, its influence on their chances of getting out of poverty, comes to a large extent from the professional-individualist approach which many social workers have adopted. This attitude matches the neo-liberal ideology whose influence on social policy makers in Israel has grown over the past years.

With reference to the perceived ways of dealing with poverty, the research points to four responsible actors in the following hierarchy: the poor individual, the government, the local authority, and the local social services department. They all have an influence on the type of intervention of the social service departments in their dealings with poverty.

With regard to the perception of the role of the social services departments in dealing with poverty, the basic starting point that directs most of the heads of social services departments was that poverty as a social problem is not within their area of responsibility and those who live in poverty are not seen as a clearly defined target population. They see their authority in dealing with poor people as the same as dealing with other populations.

The range of services that are supplied by the departments shows that there are two perspectives on the perceived responsibility of the departments: one relates to creating infrastructure and individual conditions for the poor person to exert his personal responsibility to deal with his poverty; the second relates to activities that assist the State in actualizing its responsibility towards those who live in poverty by providing information and assistance to voluntary agencies that provide for basic needs like food and medicines. The department heads are involved in providing assistance to people living in poverty to enable them to manage in their situation but do not invest energy in getting them out of poverty.

Conclusions: The local social service departments must change at some very basic level their approach to the issue of poverty in order to fill a significant role in dealing with it. They should stop focusing on individual-family work and develop an approach that combines four professional practices: individual, family, community, and policy. They must recognize that poverty is a social problem that is located within their area of responsibility and all types of poor are in their target population. There must also be a basic change in social work training and skills to include the issue of poverty in the curriculum.

***Introduction:
The Challenge Facing the Local Authorities***

In the past years there is a growing recognition of the importance of dealing with the problem of poverty and the need to develop feasible programs to decrease poverty. This awakening is connected to different factors and comes, amongst other things, from continued reports of the extent and depth of poverty as well as the widening social gaps in Israel.

The rising recognition of the essential need to deal with poverty is expressed in the involvement of different national agencies including government ministries, the National Insurance Institute, Bank of Israel, the Joint Distribution Committee, foundations, national non-profit agencies, and even businesses. These agencies bring ideas and propose programs for dealing with the problem of poverty. Amongst the most prominent expressions of this is the Israeli government's decision to promote a number of projects with the goal of reducing poverty, like the introduction of negative income tax for working people, increasing old-age allowances, enforcement of labor laws, reducing the number of foreign workers, and subsidies for day care for low-wage workers.

The dominant approach that guides programs for dealing with poverty emphasizes the role of government and other national agents and does not dedicate sufficient attention to the essential role of local authorities – a role of considerable value although it in no way replaces the overall responsibility of the government.

The way in which policy makers and service providers see their role and responsibility in dealing with poverty has an impact on policy delineation and the type and characteristics of the services provided. The relationship between social work and poverty is a long one that dates back to the early days of the profession in the 19th century

(Dowling, 1999; Gibelman, 1999). It has been influenced over the years by socioeconomic reality, the status of the profession, and the way social workers, in general, and workers in the local social services, in particular, perceived their role in this area. The social service departments in the local authorities are at an essential crossroads in dealing with poverty. The growth in the magnitude of poverty on the one hand and the ways the government deals with the phenomenon, on the other hand, have created a new reality that presents a challenge to the social services.

Raising people out of poverty takes initiative and implementation of a variety of programs and the enlistment of inputs from areas and organizations from all sectors (government, local authorities, the Third Sector, and the business sector). Local social service departments can and should be the central player in this type of process on the local authority level. Their position, their authority, and their knowledge allow them to be active in coordinating and connecting between the significant agencies that work in the field. A process such as this could facilitate the integration between short-term and long-term programs including projects to develop work places (Barzuri, 2004) – programs that go beyond workshops and continuing education that serve to improve human capital on an individual basis. This type of process could be an integral part of the socioeconomic development of townships where the local authority and mayors take on more active roles (Ben-Elia, 2004; Gal, 2006; Hecht, 2003; Felzenstein, 1994).

This work spotlights the importance of the local authority and their social service departments' involvement which is determined to a large extent by their willingness and ability to act through developing efficient programs to take individual and families out of poverty and to lessen the damage caused by poverty. The study uses a qualitative approach in order to examine the attitudes and perceptions of seventeen social service department heads regarding the essence of poverty, ways of dealing with it, and practical actions that they have

taken in dealing with the individuals and families in poverty. It is possible that the findings of this study do not provide a sufficiently full picture of all social service departments, nevertheless, it can shed some light on understanding the characteristics of the work of these departments, their heads, and even indicate the implications of their approach.

This study is meant to answer the question whether the perception that the local social service departments should fill a significant role in dealing with poverty is put into practice. Or, in other words, do the local social service departments recognize that poverty is a social problem that is within their realm of responsibility? Do they recognize that those who live in poverty are their target population and what are the practice and characteristics of the services for them?

The next section, Section 1, presents a discussion of the importance of the involvement of local authority, local social service departments, and other local agencies in dealing with poverty and the various problems attached to such involvement. After that, Section 2 presents the methodology and Section 3 presents the major findings on the way that local social service department heads perceive the causes of poverty, the appropriate ways of dealing with it, and a description of the actions that the local social service departments take in this field. The last section, Section 4, discusses the significance of the findings, their implications and attempts to answer the central question of this paper regarding the local social service departments' willingness and preparedness to deal with the issue of poverty on the local level.

1. Local Involvement in Dealing with Poverty: Advantages and Problems

The approach that local authorities and specifically the local social service departments should be significant partners in dealing with the problem of poverty, in addition and in parallel to government involvement, is supported by six principle arguments:

A) The local social service departments have legal and professional responsibility to assist weak populations. The local social service departments were established based on the Welfare Assistance Law 1958, in order to offer assistance to needy populations in all of the local authorities. They are a central agent that is in direct contact with populations living in distress and they represent an address for assistance in supplying services. The role of the departments is to provide distressed populations, including those living in poverty, with a variety of types of assistance including individual and family therapy and counseling, community work, and services like child care, hostels for people with physical and development disabilities, day centers for the elderly, and material assistance (housewares, transport for doctor's appointments, home help, and the like). The local social service departments also connect the distressed population with other organizations that offer assistance, like food charities. The resources available to the departments, their abilities to help poor individuals and families, the quality and extent of services that they can provide, as well as their ability to initiate programs can have a significant impact on the municipal populations living in poverty.

B) The local social service departments have direct knowledge of the needs and distress of the municipal residents. The local agents know better than any national agency (government ministries and other national organizations) the needs and problems of municipal residents. Furthermore, poverty and social distress often have a special, local character, due to the geographic location, economic infrastructure and social, cultural and ethnic character. Local agencies that are aware of these characteristics and know local needs are able to fulfill a central role in initiating and implementing intervention programs aimed at dealing with poverty.

C) Utilizing the community potential and strengthening the community. The local community has great potential to assist in dealing with poverty and distress on the local level, which can be developed and nurtured in a number of ways: bolstering the local authority departments (and in particular the social service and education departments); cultivating active local leadership and local voluntary agencies that supply social services and advocacy; nurturing informal assistance networks; and, activating businesses and volunteers in the community. It should also be mentioned, that the local community is the main arena for developing “social capital” amongst municipal residents (Korazim-Körösy, Katz and Carmon, 2009; Laor and Shapiro, 2007; Saegert, Thompson and Warren, 2001). This capital can contribute to strengthening the social solidarity of the community, fostering mutual assistance between residents, and boosting willingness to donate to the community and to assist residents who live in poverty (Katan and Weiss, 2007). Channeling the local community potential, should it exist, into involvement in the area of poverty can help in dealing with the poverty problem. In municipalities where the community potential is known to be weak, efforts should be invested in nurturing and strengthening it. Here, too, the local social service departments can fulfill a central role.

D) Proven successes of local involvement. The pessimist's outlook – according to which weak neighborhoods with complex social problems such as poverty have little chance of success and so it is best to leave them alone – does not match evidence that local initiatives to change the socioeconomic situation of weak municipalities have succeeded in advancing the welfare interests of their residents. Arieh Hecht (Hecht, 2003) examined changes over the years 1983-1999 in the socioeconomic ranking of five weak municipalities, and pointed to an improvement in three Jewish municipalities (*Yerusham, Or Akiva* and *Yoqneam*), a mixed one (*Maalot-Tarshicha*), and an Arab municipality (*Kalansewa*). Hecht attributes the changes mainly to the local authority leadership that acted methodically and tenaciously through initiatives and implementation of programs that brought about local advancement. Vollansky also (Vollansky, 2006) points to the role of a number of local authority heads in contributing to the success of their communities in significantly raising the number of pupils qualifying for matriculation certification between the years 1998-2002. Additional evidence from the last few months indicates the contribution of local authority leadership in social advancement of other towns – like *Eilat, Bat-Yam, Holon, Yerucham, and Maalot-Tarshicha*. Nevertheless, to date, it is not known of a local authority head who has decided to concentrate on initiating and implementing specific programs to narrow poverty. Local involvement to deal with social problems like poverty where local authority leadership plays a central role is most essential and can bear significant results.

E) The willingness of business agents and philanthropies to support local social projects. In the past few years there is an increased willingness of voluntary agencies and business organizations to adopt the principle of social responsibility and for philanthropies to encourage the development and implementation of local initiatives meant to deal with various social problems. These agencies even prefer to support local projects over national programs.

Local initiatives dealing with poverty are likely to receive financial assistance, organizational advice, encouragement and nurturing from interested agencies.

F) Dealing with poverty as a clearly local interest. Lessening the extent of poverty and its accompanying damage should be not only a national goal but also a local one that fits municipal interests. Poverty is a source of a variety of social ills, like violence and crime that harm the quality of life for municipality residents and damage the ability to attract strong populations that are likely to contribute to the socioeconomic power. The local authority and local agencies have a clear interest to act to lessen the extent of poverty in their communities.

Nonetheless the approach that supports local involvement in dealing with poverty arouses opposition based on various claims that stress the role of national government as the main agent, if not the only one, in this area as well as the difficulties that face the development of local involvement.

A) The government is the only agent that is capable of dealing in a significant way with problems of poverty. The problem of poverty is complex and multidimensional. To deal with it systematically and with the best chance of success requires investment of resources and initiating and implementing programs on a wide scale. Only governments have the power and authority to enlist and direct resources on a national level (increasing benefits, widening infrastructures for employment and transportation, social legislation, and developing educational projects that can contribute to lessening the extent of poverty). This recognition was one of the underlying views that directed the design and development of the welfare state after the Second World War (Doron, 1995; Harris, 2001).

B) The weakness of the local authorities. Many local authorities and for the main part those where people in poverty and social distress live also have serious difficulties due to frequent financial crises and are incapable of allocating resources to local social services departments to deal with poverty (Kop, 2007 and previous years).

C) Limited capabilities of the community. In many cases weak local authorities have limited capabilities to organize and act in solving socioeconomic problems. In such communities the social capital is limited and the local agencies that are likely to help in dealing with poverty – that is, various community organizations, informal assistance networks, and volunteers – are active in very limited or narrow ways. The weakness of the community may be due to a number of factors like neglect on the part of the local authority or the government, the existence of structural social problems, the absence of an economic base, and low level social capital (Katan and Weiss, 2007).

D) A low willingness on the part of local leadership to deal with poverty. Local authority involvement in the issue of poverty is to a large extent contingent on the willingness of local leadership, and primarily the head of the local authority, to deal with the issue and to allocate sufficient resources to it. Evidence shows that many local authority heads prefer not to get into this area (Lahat, Menachem and Katan, 2007). This approach is guided by various motivations, like the belief that the subject of poverty should be an area of responsibility for the government, a recognition of the inability of the authority to deal with such a complex issue, a fear of harming the image of the city, a lack of awareness of the importance of the subject, a concern that offering assistance will encourage additional poor people to move to the municipality, the preference to give priority to other areas like education, sanitation, infrastructure, and public spaces, that are perceived more prestigious than poverty.

E) Low involvement of the local social service departments in activities to lift people out of poverty. Partial evidence indicates low involvement of local social service departments in the area of poverty. Among their clients, social service departments assist people who live in poverty though only part of them initiate and implement programs that are targeted specifically at their poor populations (Ofek, 2008). The reasons for this limited involvement have only been partially examined until now. A number of studies indicate that this approach has a variety of sources: heavy workloads and a lack of resources that do not allow them to deal in a systematic and serious way with the issue; a lack of belief by the workers in their ability to change the situation of those living in poverty; the lack of sufficient contact between the workers and the population living in poverty; different perceptions of poverty among the workers that make the design of an approach to dealing with the issue difficult; and the problem of a preference for dealing with stronger populations (Ofek, 2008; Strier, 2007; Krumer-Nevo, Slonim-Nevo, Hirshenson-Segev and Ben-Yishai, 2005; Sherlin and Shamaï, 1991).

F) “Freeing” the State from its responsibility for dealing with social issues. Decentralization of the issue of poverty and giving part of the responsibility to the local authorities, national agencies, and local non-governmental agents is likely to help the government and to free it of some of its responsibility for an all-encompassing and systematic treatment of different social issues (among them poverty).

For those who are against the local approach, their fear is that giving the local authorities and local social service departments the responsibility to deal with poverty, even in part, lessens the obligation of the State to deal with the issue, damages the extent that national resources are allocated to the issue, and may even increase the territorial inequality between municipalities that can gather forces to deal with the problem of poverty and those that cannot.

The different arguments that obligate government and local authority involvement strengthen the approach that dealing with poverty actually should be a combined effort. The local authority, and within it the local social service department, has an important role in addition to the State's commitment and not as a replacement. A significant involvement of the local social service departments is reliant on the support of various other agencies like the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services and the local political leadership as well as the willingness of the head of the local social service department and staff to deal with poverty. The level of willingness to deal with poverty and its transparency in the local social service department policy, programs and activities are undoubtedly influenced by the way the head of the department and staff perceive the problem of poverty.

In the perception of poverty the intention is on the interpretations and meaning given to the nature of the phenomenon, its causes, its consequences and ways of dealing with it. Various studies show the extent to which perceptions of poverty have a significant practical impact. The majority of the research indicates the connection between personal characteristics of the various public groups including elite groups like doctors, politicians and social workers as well as the poor themselves and the way in which they perceive poverty as well as between the perception of the meaning of poverty and its causes and the policies that are preferred by them for dealing with the phenomenon. With regard to the reasons for poverty, it is possible to point to several possible perceptions, such as: personal traits like laziness, family size, low education, unemployment, health status, a lack of employment possibilities, municipal characteristics, and dependency on welfare benefits. Ways of dealing with poverty include various means like joining the work force, economic growth, income assurance to insure a dignified standard of living, and development and implementation of programs in the areas of health and education

(Katan, 2002). The majority of studies point to the existence of a congruence between the perceived reasons for poverty and the programs that are considered most appropriate for dealing with it (Beck, et al., 1999; De Swaan, et al. 2000).

As of today there is no reliable empirical information on how the heads of local social service departments in Israel perceive the problem of poverty, the role of the departments themselves in dealing with the problem, the link between perceptions of poverty of the heads and the services they see as necessary to provide to the poor and the services that are actually provided by the departments. This information is likely to help in understanding the way that local social service departments deal with the issue of poverty as it is reflected in their activities. It is also likely to help in laying out action plans that will lead to the advancement of these departments in dealing with the issue of poverty.

The research and its findings that are discussed herein will supply an answer to some of these questions. The study was conducted among a group of heads of social service departments in local authorities in the period between July 2003 and January 2004. The study had three purposes: identifying their perceptions of poverty and the poor, examining their opinions regarding the most appropriate policy for dealing with poverty and the poor, and identifying what is actually done to deal with poverty through their departments.

2. Presenting the Study: Local Authority Social Service Department Heads and Their Approach to Poverty and Dealing with It

Considering the scarcity of studies in the area, a qualitative research approach was chosen that would allow the identification of the basic components of the phenomenon under study and an understanding of its sources and the context within which it occurs (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Straus and Corbin, 1990). This qualitative research focuses on an understanding of the significance that participating department heads attribute to the phenomenon and the way in which this shapes how they relate and respond to it. Human action is perceived as symbolic, meaning the way in which people express the nature of reality explains the way in which they perceive and react to this reality and the way they perceive themselves in relation to it (Sabar-Ben Yehoshua, 2001; Shkedi 2003; Blumer, 1969; Maykut and Morehouse, 1994; Patton, 2002). The power of this research approach is in its explanatory nature, that is, its emphasis on the perceptions of those being studied. The combination of the entirety of perceptions allows an overall understanding of the phenomenon in question (Denzin, 1989). In the study of poverty the approach allows an identification of the way that the respondents in the study perceive the nature of poverty, its sources and ways of dealing with it.

A. The Study Population

The sample used in the study was a purposeful sample that included seventeen local social service department heads from different localities.

Perceptions of poverty and ways of dealing with it do not occur in a vacuum. They are influenced among other things by personal

encounters with the poor of all types, including immigrants from various places, minorities, *haredim* (ultra-Orthodox), single-parent families, the elderly, the working, and the unemployed. They are also influenced by basic professional perceptions and from local and organizational characteristics. That is, poverty in a wealthy Jewish municipality in the center of the country has a different expression than poverty in a Bedouin municipality in the south of the country. The ability of a large city to initiate programs to deal with poverty is different from that of a city in the periphery. For this reason, the following three criteria for choosing departments heads for participation in the study were used:

- 1) The location of the municipality using a socioeconomic ranking of the local authority in cluster deciles (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003) with attention to selecting municipalities from each cluster.
- 2) The characteristics of the municipality population using personal knowledge of the researchers.
- 3) Geographic location of the municipality.

The first, seventh and tenth socioeconomic cluster are represented by one department and the rest of the clusters by two or more departments. The study included two *haredi* municipalities, two Arab municipalities, one with a poor neighborhood, five development towns with different immigrant populations, five cities, a town composed of a large number of free professionals, and a municipality where a large number of residents own large businesses (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002; Seidman, 1991; Shkedi, 2003).

Agreement to participate in the study was voluntary and permission was received by telephone at which time the study and its goals were described. Of the 26 who were approached, seventeen agreed (fifteen women and two men). Of these, twelve have Master's level degrees in social work and five have BA degrees. Length of time in the

profession varied between thirteen and thirty-three years and the length of time in the job between three and sixteen years.

B. *Research Tools*

The research used two tools:

- In the first phase a focus group was held to which eleven of the fourteen planned participants came. The meeting lasted more than two hours and was led by one of the researchers with the presence of an additional researcher and a research assistance who took notes. The focus group discussed a number of subjects that were predetermined: the essence of poverty; causes of poverty; personal and professional experience with poverty; perceptions of the ways the government, the local authority and local social service departments should deal with poverty; and, the actual actions in the area. At the beginning of the meeting the goals were presented and the discussion opened with the participants relating to the subject of the study. In the course of the discussion, the researchers made an effort to insure that all participants took part and related to all of the subjects.
- In the second phase, in-depth open interviews were conducted with six participants who did not participate in the focus group. The interview protocol was based on what was learned from the focus group and included an explanation to the interviewer and a set of leading questions relating to the following subjects: causes of poverty; characteristics of those living in poverty; the results of poverty; the appropriate ways of dealing with poverty; and, what the local social service departments should be doing on the subject of poverty. In each interview the participant was asked to give personal details and to report on the first personal and professional encounter with poverty. The interviews were conducted by a

research assistant except for one interview that was conducted jointly with one of the researchers. All of the interviews were conducted in the office of the department head and lasted between one and two hours. Audio recordings were made of the discussions in the focus group and the interviews and were transcribed in full (Fonatan and Frey, 1994; Dowling, 1999; Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, 1995; Seidman, 1991; Shkedi, 2003).

C. Method of Analysis

The material was analyzed in an integrated way: a deductive analysis using pre-chosen categories on the basis of literature dealing with poverty and an inductive analysis with categories that arose from the material (Dowling, 1999; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The deductive analysis related to three subjects: perceptions of poverty, ways of dealing with poverty, and actual means of dealing with poverty and the poor. Each subject has a number of sub-categories. All together 65 categories were identified. In the first stage, transcriptions of the focus group discussions and the in-depth interviews were divided into key phrases where each phrase received a number. In the second stage, the key phrases were categorized; phrases could be categorized into no more than four categories out of the 65. Multiple classification is an accepted method in qualitative research since a key phrase may have a number of meanings. So, for example, the key phrase “he is poor because he is lazy” can be classified in the category of “personal reasons for poverty” as well as in the category “traits of poor people.” The judgment process included an independent classification of key phrases by two skilled readers with an academic education in the field of poverty. In the case of a lack of agreement regarding classification, a discussion was initiated between the researchers to reach a consensus on the classification. Categories that were not related to by at least half of the department

heads were not included in the analysis. In the third stage, meanings and interpretations were given in order to reach the higher significance; to this end, “core categories” were located (Strauss 1987 in Givaton, 2001). This refers to an integrative category that brings a deeper understand of the phenomenon being studied. In the presentation of the findings use was made of a portion of the key phrases although the conclusions of the research are based on all of the key phrases including those that are not presented. When called for, the context in which the comments were made is also given.

3. The Findings: Causes of Poverty, Most Appropriate Ways of Dealing with It, and Available Services in Social Service Departments

The following are the study findings by three main subjects which were investigated with the participating heads of the social service departments. Some of the areas include sub-categories as detailed.

A. Reasons for Poverty

The professional literature deals with a variety of causes for poverty: personal causes whose source is in the individual poor person; causes whose source is in the socioeconomic structure of the state; causes stemming from government policy; value causes; and, causes stemming from the socioeconomic reality in a given place and time (Beck, et al., 1999; Dean and Melrose, 1999; Katan, 2000; Krumer-Nevo, 2000; Rehner et al., 1997). In this study, three groups of reasons for poverty were used – personal, social structural, and reasons stemming from government policy. Each one of these groupings includes in it a number of other reasons. Two of the other

broad categories – value causes and causes stemming from socioeconomic reality in a given time and place – were not identified.

1) **Personal causes**

Personal reasons attribute poverty to the poor individual. It anchors the reason in the individual's character, abilities, life conditions, and primarily in the behavior of the person living in poverty (Cohen, 1997; Katan, 2002; Krumer-Nevo, 2000). The heads of departments in this research pointed to three reasons for poverty whose source was in the poor individual: personal behavior that leads to poverty; the relation of the poor individual to basic Israeli societal values; and personal characteristics.

▪ *Personal behavior as a cause of poverty*

Three types of behavior of the poor individual were perceived by department heads in the study as causes of individual poverty or were presented as reasons for his remaining poor:

- Laziness: "...the hardest is to see a young woman with strength, who could really do anything... at the core, I don't think there is a problem of work... let's see what you can do with yourself...."
- "I deserve it": "I should get it, you owe me. *You* is the State; everyone owes them"; "It is coming to me... it is passed from the previous generation who didn't make the effort to take care of themselves. The State should give..."; "and there are people... who no matter what you do for them or what you suggest to them, everyone always owes them. We come across this often in our daily work...."
- Acceptance and completion: "...can manage on very little, with very low ambition..."; "these people, in my opinion, are people who don't do enough for themselves to accomplish more..."; " people who have learned to live at a very low standard of living and adapted to this reality. They accept it and don't even try to get out of it..."; "...we have many

large families who live under difficult conditions but they have an interest in managing with little, many in the *haredi* population... it is a way of life....”

These three behaviors that are attributed to the individual – laziness, the expectation that the State will take care of them, and the acceptance of their life reality – all have a commonality: they show a lack of individual responsibility that expresses itself in non-participation in the labor market or in participation at such a low level that it only provides an impoverished living. Perceiving behavior as a reason for poverty has great significance because it links poverty to the individual’s efforts (or lack thereof) to work and to advance (Feagin, 1972; Stephenson, 2000).

▪ ***The relation to basic societal values in Israel***

Values are the moral principles and behavioral codes upon which our actions as people rest, in relation to ourselves and in relation to evaluating the behavior of others. These principles are relative and are dependent on time and place (Donnison, 1994). In the opinion of the department heads who participated in the study, the absence of two values – the value of work and the value of education – in the individual poor person are a cause of poverty. These two values are perceived of as important and formative in their relation towards the poor person.

- Non-actualization of the value of work: “...I would bring in the subject of values, how convinced is the individual or does the individual think that he needs to strive to achieve his livelihood, how much motivation is there...”; “...I was sitting with the mayor yesterday, with a client and I admit that I was embarrassed to say to the woman, ‘get up, you want to work, I will find you work now’... these people have been educated to be parasites....”

- Non-actualization of the value of education: "...I have a family that I work with. A very difficult family where the father worked half a day; a family with eight children... when the children reached high school then... there is an indifference and lack of concern on the family's part to support and help their children...." In contrast to this family, there was another family in the opposite situation: "They taught themselves something, found significance in their lives, a taste for life, that there is a reason to get up in the morning, it doesn't matter if she works... as a cosmetician, or a writer, or a doctor...."

The importance of values in Israeli society is also expressed in the connection that the interviewees saw between the value of work and the value of education:

"The moment that a person works... he will educate the next generation differently..."; "this is a good target population, because they are motivated. These people work...."

The value of work was classified differently for three groups of poor people that were identified by the department heads. The first two groups included veteran poor and the newly poor:

"...it is different when you live all of your life in chronic poverty... it is difference than having and then suddenly not having...."

The newly poor are people who have worked and want to work, those who succeeded and then fell, or those who are no longer working because of changes in the labor market. The newly poor are not expected to stay in the cycle of poverty:

"...I have families that I never expected to see in the Welfare Department, asking for help and clothing."

The veteran poor, in contrast, live off of transfer allowances, do not work and do not want to work:

"People come who don't want to work... who have no desire, no push to go out to work."

The distinction is sometimes described as the reality of two tangent circles, the circle of work and the circle of poverty. When someone is in the work circle he is not meant to also be in the poverty circle. It should be remembered, though, that of all of those living in poverty, the chronic veteran poor are in contact more with the local social services departments than other groups.

The third group of poor that is growing in Israeli society is the working poor:

“...people who have learned to live at a very low standard of living, who have gotten used to this reality. They accept this and don’t even try to get out of it...”; “...and there are people who simply accept this as a fact of life... I will manage on NIS 4,000 a month...”

These poor were perceived as responsible for their situation in that they are not doing what is expected of workers today. That is, they are not adjusting to changes in the labor market, not improving their education, or developing new skills that are appropriate to the labor market needs (Barzuri, 2004). The working poor present a dissonance that breaks the perceived dichotomy, according to which those in the circle of work are not also in the circle of poverty.

It is important to note that for two groups of poor, poverty is viewed as legitimate and, as such, it is seen as appropriate to assist them without any connection to work. The two groups are the elderly and children. These two groups are not expected to be part of the work circle and when it comes to them, there is a sense of social responsibility that stems from their dependence on others.

Judging and evaluating people by these values is not unique to Israel or to these times and has been around since the pre-State period (Monnickendam, 2005). The judgment relates to the way in which the individual actualizes the value of work for himself if he works and serves as a model for a way of life for his children. In the modern world where education is seen as a resource that contributes to social

and employment mobility, the poor person who does not recognize the importance of education is seen as responsible for his situation as well as the future situation of his children.

▪ ***Personal characteristics***

The third group of causes is connected to personal characteristics of the poor. In this connection, several causes for poverty were noted – inadequate education, limited abilities, and low motivation.

- The lack of education and its influence on the ability to find employment, the type of employment, and the level of salary was raised by department heads as a reason for poverty across all populations: men and women, Jews and Arabs, secular and *haredi*. “...poverty begins in my opinion with a lack of education...”; “someone who doesn’t learn has no job, no profession...”; “...many people do work and do want to work and don’t have the opportunity because they don’t have a profession, the education they have is from a *yeshiva*...”
- Low motivation and limited abilities are also seen as reasons for poverty: “...the ability of people to acquire resources varies greatly. There are those with very low abilities and those who even if they have the abilities, don’t know how to use the resources...”; “...a poor family is one that has no source of income, perhaps a lack of good parenting as well, and no ability to advance, develop and be integrated into the work circle. It could be that this stems from a lack of motivation... this is something either in their personality or their abilities as a person or on the level of motivation...”

It should be noted that a lack of education is seen by department heads as a cause of poverty that is attributed to the individual and not due to structural causes, like a lack of education stemming from a poor education system or lack of accessibility to education.

2) Structural causes

In this study, structural causes relate to characteristics of society and components in the social structure that are perceived of as causes for poverty (Weiss, 2004; Rehner, et al., 1997). Department heads who participated in this study cited three structural causes for poverty: poverty as an inseparable part of society's structure, belonging to a poor family, and belonging to a minority.

- Every society has its poor: "...the phenomenon of poverty is not new and it is written in the Scriptures 'for the poor will never cease being from the land'... and this is a phenomenon all over the world..."; "...there will always be weaker elements in society, those who are not able to work..."; "...poverty as a value as an ideal...."
- Belonging to a poor family: "...it is different when you live all of your life in 'chronic' poverty...but you are used to living in a situation that you were born into that. It is different from having and then suddenly not having..."; "It depends... on the background that one comes from, in the reality that one grows up with..."; "It is a vicious cycle, his son will also be this way...."
- Belonging to a certain population group: "...we absorbed Ethiopians in the last year... we haven't given them the opportunities to survive..."; "...I look around also at the poor... amongst us in the Arab sector..."; "...amongst the towns in the lowest cluster there are also the *haredi* towns...."

The local social service department heads perceived poverty as inseparable part of human society and part of the structure of society (Dean and Melrose, 1999). Within Israeli society, belonging to one of three groups – *haredim*, Arabs and Ethiopian immigrants – was perceived as a cause for poverty with an influence on the possibility of integration into the work world. Still, it is important to note that the

way in which department heads related to these three groups was linked directly to the characteristics of these populations in their areas.

3) **Reasons linked to government policy**

Public policy includes what the government decides to do or not do through political, institutional, legislative, and organizational arrangements. These arrangements reflect a world view, administrative culture, professional and geographic perspectives, and priorities of a certain society at a given time (Arian, Nachmias and Amir, 2002; Nachmias and Menachem, 1999).

The local social service department heads pointed to five reasons for the creation of poverty in Israel stemming from government policy: the economic ideology that directs government policy; the way in which the government deals with the economic situation; priorities in resource allocation as they are reflected in budget policy; transfer allowance policies; and, salary policies.

▪ *The economic ideology of the government*

Underlying every public policy rests ideology that includes a set of values and a world view. Economic ideology delineates the way the market economy is directed and the involvement of the government in economic and social processes (Ben-Bassat and Dahan, 2004; Hill, 1997; Fischer, 2003). Reference to the economic ideology that directs government policy at the time of the research as a factor influencing the economic situation of the individual in society was general:

“...in the last two years the government has decided that it is not a welfare state...”; “...today the Minister of Finance presents it from where he sits...”; “...the latest economic program is one of cutbacks, it is a disaster...what can I say, to her where will she go to work....”

The department heads viewed the economic ideology of the government as it is expressed through socioeconomic policy at the time of the study as a cause of poverty.

▪ ***The way in which the government deals with the economic situation***

The way in which a government chooses to deal with socioeconomic phenomena is expressed in the policy that it adopts in regard to these phenomena. In this study, local social service department heads grasped the way the government chose to deal with the level of unemployment and the opportunities for employments as a cause of poverty:

“...you can’t stop (transfer payments) and say ‘go out to work,’ and there is no work in a city that is plagued with unemployment like...”; “...the subject of unemployment. The rate of unemployment has grown greatly...”; “...amongst us in the Arab sector the percent of unemployment is the highest in the country, 23 of the leading towns are from the Arab sector...” “...I want to place the blame first and foremost on the government...there was a promise to build a factory here... to my great sorrow, it fell through for all types of reasons due to government decisions...”

The department heads in the study perceived the shortage of employment and rise in unemployment particularly in the areas in the periphery as a cause of poverty. What is more, the shortage in work places was seen as a reality for which the government provides no solutions.

▪ ***Priorities in resource allocation***

Resource allocation expresses the government’s distribution policy (Ben-Bassat and Dahan, 2004; Hill, 1997) – that is, the composition and size of government expenditure represents the priorities of issues, populations, and various geographic areas. Social service department

heads perceived the pattern of resource allocation by the government as a reason for and a cause of poverty:

“...there is a problem in the allocation of resources and budgets between the municipalities in the Jewish and Arab sector...”; “...there is no budget, no encouragement, and no investment...”; “...also in these areas there are cut-backs. In the area of training courses...”; “...if society decides on a law of compulsory education it must allow the implementation of the law...”

Department heads perceived resource allocation as giving government priority to the Jewish, secular sector who live in the center of the country and for local authorities with economic resources and not for poor populations or poor local authorities.

▪ ***Transfer allowance policy***

The social security arrangement, the set of government allowances and pensions, is the central mechanism that the welfare state has developed in order to ensure a basic income for individuals and families. This system is perceived by neo-liberal economic ideologists as having a negative influence on the individual's readiness to integrate into the labor market (Doron, 1995; 1999; Gal, 2004; Katan, 2000; 2002). This way of looking at things has also, in part, been adopted by social service department heads. Three dimensions in the existing transfer allowance system in Israel were seen by department heads participating in this study as a reason for poverty:

- The influence of the method of transfer allowances on their recipients and primarily their attitude to work: “...when someone receives income allowance that is relatively high it will encourage him not to work and not to do anything with himself...”; “...In my opinion the government also created poor people through the National Insurance Institute and the Employment Office...”; “...and there is a culture,

negative competition to get an allowance. Not to work and to go for income allowance, to sign up at the Employment Office....”

- The criteria for receiving transfer allowances: “...there should be a very thorough check into the subject of allowances and entitlement issues. I don’t think that they should be given in such a widespread matter...”; “...they should have to fight for the disability allowance....”
- The level of the allowances: “...people who live on allowances are living in disgraceful poverty...”; “...it is terrible distress. It is not an amount of money that it is possible to live on...”; “...income allowance today is ridiculous. It is not enough, not for food, for clothing, books, school, school trips...”; “...the whole subject of allowances. The level of allowances is so low and so insufficient for individual needs let alone a family’s needs....”

The department heads viewed transfer allowances as contributing to poverty for a number of reasons: first, allowances that replace salary, like income assurance, are seen as an impediment to work and whoever does not work is poor. Second, the lack of distinction between types of poverty – one type who are worthy of receiving allowances like people with disabilities or self-employed individuals who are not working; and the second type who are not worthy because they do not work and are abusing the system, like single-parent mothers, *haredim*, Arabs, and Bedouin. Third, the level of allowances is seen as insufficient to live on as the sole source of income. That is, as they see it, the State creates poverty through the low level of transfer allowances like the old-age pension, disability allowance, and other allowances.

- ***Salary policy***

An additional area of policy that came up in the study as a source of poverty is the salary policy in the labor force and particularly the low level salaries and in particular the level of the minimum wage:

“...because they both work and still don’t reach a minimum salary...”;
“...there is a hierarchy of payments that is abnormal in this country. He who works the hardest, receives the least...”; “...and additional point is the minimum wage, and it is good that there is a minimum...but it is still a wage that doesn’t allow one to do very much...”; “...discharged soldiers when they begin work in the construction branch receive quite a lot of money, and then they return from the East (post-Army travels). Who is willing to work for such a ridiculously low wage?”; “...if they would work and would receive a salary that they could live on – even minimally – they would survive....”

The minimum wage level is set by the government based on the Minimum Wage Law and the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor is responsible for its enforcement. The law is meant to set the lowest wage level at which it is legal to employ a worker. Over the years there has been a change and today the law serves as the opposite – the maximum level salary for unskilled workers, those with a low education level, and service industry workers. The perception that arises from the study is that the way in which the minimum wage policy is set and applied causes poverty amongst those who work. These workers are classified today as the working poor and in the past few years, their numbers have grown in the population (Sussman, 2004). It is important to note that at the time of this study there was no public discourse on the subject of enforcement of the minimum wage law.

In conclusion, the picture of the perceived causes for poverty amongst local social service department heads is a varied one that is connected to the poor individual who is responsible for his situation,

the social structure and government policy. The picture matches on the one hand the findings of other studies on the perceived reasons amongst social workers for poverty (Weiss, 2004). On the other hand, the findings reflect the wide range of activities of the social work profession that connect between the individual and his environment and explain, to a great extent, why department heads did not see the economic structure or economic activities alone as causes of poverty but viewed this as an additional factor after individual behavior.

The department heads who participated in this research raised a variety of causes for the creation of poverty but they did not point to causality, a link, or mutual influence between reasons; they simply saw each reason separately. From this it would be possible to claim that the reasons for poverty as perceived by the department heads were not comprehensive or integrated. Nevertheless, there was a linking thread between the variety of reasons and it is the concept of “work” and its centrality as both a value and an act. Work is perceived as a value and a moral principle as well as a code of behavior that should direct the activities of man, both in relation to himself and in relation to judging others, and as a source of moral authority for the setting of policy. The power of values is that they become anchored in reality (Donison, 1994), and Israeli society sees work as a central and basic value and people are judged by their relation to this value (Gal, 2002; Yishai, 1999). The perception stems from the approach that emphasizes the role of personal responsibility of some of those who live in poverty.

B. Ways of Dealing with Poverty

With regard to responsibility in dealing with poverty, the findings of the study point to four agents in the following order: the poor individual, the government, the local authority, and the local social services department.

▪ ***The responsibility of the individual who lives in poverty***

According to the perceptions of the department heads who participated in the study dealing with poverty is first and foremost the responsibility of the individual himself, in three ways:

- The person living in poverty must help himself: "...I'm one of those who are speaking first of individual responsibility..."; "...the person coming for help must stand up by himself...a person must manage himself and his life..."; "... 'I have nothing' doesn't work for me...I go directly to the practical step of what do you do with this..."; "...these people, I think they are who don't do enough for themselves to reach more...."
- The person who lives in poverty should make every effort to work: "...to what extent is a person convinced and does he think that he must work hard to get his livelihood..."; "...how much are you willing to compromise and take work that is more simple or on a lower level..."; "...there are people who simply take it as a fact of life, that this is my place of work and it worth guard it. And this is it; I will manage on NIS 4,000 per month...and then there are definitely others who work more than one shift to raise their income for their family...."
- The poor person must educate his children to advance their education and join the labor force: "...I think that parents must also be a role model for their children. And if a child is educated and raised in a home where he knows that his parents go out to work in the morning and this is an important part of their lives and he is raised with this vision within the home, he will also internalize these things when he goes out on his own and grows into adulthood..."; "...I know that a person who advance his education...he will understand that the value of work is a very important thing..."; "...children who grow up in a home where no one works why should they go out to work..."; "...the moment someone works...and he is not poor, he will educate the next generation..."

The approach that responsibility lies with the individual poor person for dealing with his situation reflects the perception of poverty as stemming from the behavior of the individual. As presented in the previous section, a person who helps himself is a person who makes every effort to change his situation through joining the labor force, advancement, and a concern for educating his children to become part of the work force.

▪ ***Government responsibility***

The heads of the local social service departments reasoned that the government has a responsibility to deal with poverty in Israel and with the needs of those living in poverty and it should do so in a number of ways: in program development that allows the poor to survive through giving transfer allowances of an appropriate financial level, through sharpening the criteria for the allowances, and through professional training and investment in education. Job creation, as a way of dealing with poverty, was not seen as an area of responsibility of the State. The following are details of what department heads perceived as the areas of government responsibility:

- Developing programs for surviving in poverty: These programs which have no direct impact on taking people out of poverty but help them survive in their situation, were seen as an area of government responsibility for dealing with poverty: "... in the whole area of...meals. To build a program, present it to the government, or the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services or to additional senior level officials who will examine it and then put it into effect in the lower populations..."; "...there should be an enlarging of existing services...therapeutic clubs, parent-child centers..."; "There is a trend today of workshops, how to learn to live with the new economic situation...this is the right direction, in my opinion. This is right for working people, the State should invest more resources. Today work places fund these things. This should become the norm. This should be

per-population. A project for pensioners, by age groups, for young families, for different family situations, for people with disabilities.”

- Appropriate levels of transfer allowances: The social security system is a key mechanism that the State uses to ensure income for population who cannot do this on their own. The perception of the State responsibility on this level emphasizes that the State should set transfer allowances on a level that does not leave this population of recipients in poverty. “...if you determine that this family is needy, so give them what they need to live...”; “...the State does not provide for the needy populations what they need. Income assurance today is ridiculous....It is the welfare state’s responsibility...I want the State to decide. I want the State to determine what the basket is that a person needs to receive in order to live...”; “...I would enlarge the allowances so that recipients can live with a little more respect.”
- Sharpening the criteria for transfer allowances: The heads of the local social departments perceived that setting appropriate criteria for transfer allowances is also within the government’s responsibility. “...welfare should be according to the National Insurance Institute. I truly believe in this institution. It should be given according to objective, codified criteria...”; “...I would perhaps make more stringent criteria....”
- Professional training as a prominent area of government responsibility. “...the labor department should give more updated courses, so that one can find work after the course...”; “...professional training that gives tools and the ability to go out into the labor force...”; “...professional training. To develop special answers for this population (*haredim*)...”; “...training courses for those who have never worked....”
- Investing in education: The last and important area of government responsibility is that of education: “...and on a national level, I think that the solution to get out of the cycle of poverty is, at the top of the

ladder, education... and as education is higher the chances of finding employment are greater than for someone with no education...”
“...education and to give equal opportunities for all children in Israel... to be able to reach the same level of education and abilities from which they are able to advance also to higher education....”

Many studies (Katan, 2002) indicate a variety of ways of dealing with poverty on a national level: investment in education; changes in the structure of the labor market; changes in the method of transfer allowances; increasing the amount of transfer allowances; improvement of welfare services; increasing accessibility to information and rights utilization; strengthening partnership with other organizations; investment in survival programs, like food distribution and job creation. The majority of these ways were also raised by the study participants.

▪ ***The local authority responsibility***

The local authority is a political independent ruling entity that operates in the framework of the authorities that were given to it by law and dependent in most of its areas of activity on one of the government offices (Dery, 1994; Razin, 2003; Rosen Zvi, 2004). Processes of decentralization of the past few decades have brought about a new division of labor between central government and local government and, as such, many local authorities are advancing independently local social and economic development processes (Ben-Elia, 2004; Hecht, 2003). This approach has been expressed also in this research by the department heads and is reflected in their perceptions, according to which local authorities have a responsibility to deal with poverty on the local level through three methods of activity: developing sources of employment, operating local multi-system team work, and community resources recruitment.

- Developing employment sources: “...to develop sources of employment within the local area, and this is, I think, more the role of the head of the authority than mine...”; “...first of all, the mayor works to initiate and develop industrial areas so people can go out to work...”; “...we should start with the local authority which should allocate in its jurisdiction and employment area.”
- Operating local multi-system team work: “...in the past year we had forums of people...not just social workers, all kinds of people from the community who cared and we discussed the issue... how to get to the most needy families...”; “...we should sit...who should sit? – local people, people from the employment services, social services, National Insurance Institute, Ministry of Housing, the center for developing human capital...”; “...I am certainly speaking of a systemic treatment where everyone takes part in his area of expertise...”; “...because there is shared responsibility. The welfare department, the education department... the local council...”
- Recruiting community resources: “...to recruit resources from all types of community agents for the benefit of these families...”; “...there are all types of benefit societies...they also receive allowances from the municipality in the framework of funding for non-profits...”

The perception regarding the responsibility of the local authority in dealing with poverty stresses the importance of the involvement of the local leadership and the need to take direct action like development of employment sources. In a study by Hecht (2003) he pointed to the importance and possible contribution of local authority leadership in local socioeconomic development. The subject of developing employment sources – establishing factories or other employment centers, as was indicated by participants in this study – is a relatively new area of action for the local authorities (Razin, 2003). This area, in which more and more local authorities are extending their activities, represents a possible means to provide employment for residents and

take people out of poverty. Another aspect that arises from the local social service department heads perceptions on municipality responsibility is the perception of the local authority as autonomous and not as an implementation arm or “sub-contractor” of the government (Dery, 1994).

▪ ***The responsibility of the local social service department***

The local social service departments operate on the basis of the Welfare Services Law (1958) that granted the local authorities a certain measure of independence for action. In practice, to a great extent, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services sets the areas of activity and priorities for the authorities (Dery, 1994). At the time of the research, poverty was not amongst the declared issues included in the areas of activity of the Ministry and the poor were not classified as a target population. This situation is expressed in the attitudes of local social service department heads regarding their dealing with poverty. Their perception differentiated between what is within their responsibility and what is not, and reflects also the indecisiveness of some of them on the subject:

“...if we can make order in our profession and are able to say what we do and what we don’t do... what we take responsibility for and what we don’t, others will act in accordance...”

From what department heads said there is a distinction between those who see poverty as a social problem that is not within the responsibilities of the local social services departments –

“...poverty is not a social services problem...”; “...our responsibility is to present a picture of the situation. What is happening today in these families so that they (the municipality) will understand the implications of the decrease in their standard of income, an increase in their distress...”

– and those who perceive it as within their responsibility. The latter also distinguish between those who are worthy of help (“...we also tend to help those who take responsibility for what is happening to them...”; “...this is a good target population (working poor), because they are motivated. These people work...”) and those who are not worthy (“...people who cannot get out of it (poverty), are people who sink deep into drugs and alcohol, they don’t want to do anything for themselves. I won’t invest in them...”).

It turns out that local social service department heads distinguish between the poor who are worthy of services and those who are not.

Regarding the role of the social services departments, the study found different approaches as described:

“...Do you expect that we will give a check for NIS 500 to everyone?”; “...as far as I am aware, there is no poverty, there is distress and hardship...”; “...I know what my role is as a social worker... my role is to take people out of poverty and not what we do today. We help them to live in poverty...”; “...to try to help people to increase their income level...”; “...to get the maximum resources for the population... connect and pool resources....”

In conclusion, the perception of poverty and the way it should be dealt with among the heads of the local social service departments reflects to a great extent the traditional stream in social work that puts an emphasis on individual work and is influenced by the philosophy and actions of “the charity organization society.” It is less influenced by the reformist wave in social work that puts an emphasis on social change (Dowling, 1999; Weiss, 2004). It also appears that the department heads see a number of agents as responsible for dealing with poverty (the individual himself, the State, the local authority, and the social service department). The placement of these agents in a hierarchy is not simply the outcome of a complex dialectical relation of the profession of social work to poverty and the poor (Dowling,

1999; Gibelman, 1999) but also a reflection of the dependency and link between the four agents. This hierarchical view influences the involvement of their departments with poverty as will be described.

C. Services Provided to the Poor in the Local Social Service Departments

The findings of the study show that since poverty is not seen as a problem that is in the responsibility of the local social service department and the poor are not classified as a target population, the departments do not supply special services for those living in poverty. Today it is customary for the departments to divide services by target populations, like families, elderly, children, immigrants, single-parent families, and others. Nevertheless, the department heads who participated in the study pointed to four types of services for their target populations that also assist in dealing with poverty – services that focus on the individual and family, services that focus on work, meeting basic needs, and transferring information. It should be emphasized that none of these services is specifically a service for the poor population even if in practice they are the recipients of the service. At the time of the publishing of this paper, some local social service departments began to develop some targeted services in the field of employment for two sub-groups of the poor – the newly poor and the working poor – although again, they did so without classifying them as services for the poor. These two groups are characterized by their positive relation to the value of work in theory and in practice. In contrast there was no special attention given to two other groups of poor: the chronically poor, who show no interest in working, and the elderly poor or people with disabilities who live in poverty.

- **Services focusing on the individual and family**

The services for the individual and the family include a variety of programs for strengthening self-image, improving parenting skills, managing a household and the family budget, family therapy, as well as training in using resources efficiently:

“...it is true that on the level of many families I can’t do it... I can and do give specific treatment when I see the need...”; “one must find the specific solutions for individual families...”; “...to improve the level of functioning of the family, including also the area of employment...”; “...we give people the chance to store up their strength. This is the part of the semi-personal therapy. To give the hope that the future will be better...”; “...the clubs supply the services that the children need from all perspectives, including economic... parents and children centers... services for parents... to improve their self-image... to improve their level of functioning as parents...”; “I can give an example. We have been doing this for about ten years. It is the 'Nest program'... the goal is better functioning... better mothering... with a process that I am sure will even help them get out of poverty....”

- **Services focusing on work**

In the majority of departments there are services that include programs for professional training and integration into the labor force:

- Professional training programs: projects in conjunction with other organizations, like Project Renewal in the Ministry of Housing and the Employment Service. “...we are in contact with all of the active agencies... employment services... project renewal that can refer to professional training and courses, with the local colleges. We have also developed in the department a course for retraining in the field of pedicure and manicure... to actually open a small business at home...”; “...we did retraining of people in all kinds of fields. We did training teachers from *haredi* schools to become more professional... we opened a

number of courses in computers...”; “...to refer people who are really able to learn to regular educational frameworks....”

- Programs for integration into work: This refers to programs that include elements to assist the individual in finding a place of employment. “...we have tried to help put people back to work. In particular, we took upon ourselves the project with single-parent women and we tried to integrate them into work. To our great disappointment we did not succeed in finding them places of work...”; “We have a lot of Long Term Care Law cases here, and I did a personal project of the department, for many people... I said, ‘come and work, I will find you a place to work, come and work with the elderly’...”; “...there is a group here that helps, if you are looking for work, to help prepare you for it, for the personal interview, to look on the Internet, in the newspaper, looking for work and education, improving matriculation exam scores, special courses in the project renewal program....” “...one makes connections with small business owners to see if it is possible to get some people back to work with them...”; “...you go with the idea of business initiatives, anyone who succeeds also commits to employing two or three others....”

▪ **Meeting basic needs**

The departments include services that are meant to assist individuals and families in areas like: food, health, clothing, payment of exceptional bills, and purchasing medications. The department heads who participated in the study mentioned these services in various ways:

“...we have a charity organization for medicines”; “we help with institutions within the municipality... through contributions or food...”; “...just this year before the holidays we publicized... that we have clothes in good condition... we distributed some of them...”; “...a number of families that I know of have not purchased the necessary medicines for their children because of their financial hardship... we succeeded in allocating money for these families to help them with this purchase....”

“...we have an emergency fund...a sum of money that the municipality gives that is for our discretionary use...”; “...hot meals for needy kids...”; “...there have been cases where the local authority has paid for items that they have never paid for in the past...having someone’s electricity put back on...”; “To raise sums of money for specific families....” “...the discount committee gives 25 percent discount on city taxes....”

The aid that is given in the area of food is divided into two types: the encouragement of establishing soup kitchens and referring families to non-profits for the distribution of food.

“...we have an on-going relationship with all types of voluntary agencies in the community...we have organizations that provide food...”; “...we turn to non-profits...once a week they prepare baskets of fruit and vegetables that are distributed to families according to our lists....”

Nevertheless, amongst some of the department heads there was ambivalence about soup kitchens:

“...I, as the head of a social service department, will not allow there to be a soup kitchen... I am willing to help with the logistics, to give it at night, Thursday nights, when no one can see....”

▪ **Information**

This refers to activities to supply information to the municipal political level about the needs of the local residents:

“...we have the data on the needy residents... we bring the data before the mayor, the municipal administrators... it is our responsibility to be concerned for these people, the supporters of the community should know that there is a serious problem that needs tools and solutions...”; “...to present a picture of the situation. What is happening to families....”

It seems that the services provided by the welfare departments are not services specifically for those living in poverty but services **also** for them. For example, the “*Dror*” Project operates in a number of departments and helps young couples who are having difficulties in different areas (Aram, 1999). From the reports of department heads who participated in the study there was no uniformity between departments in the extent and variety of services that they are able to provide their populations. This has several possible explanations: geographic and demographic differences between local social services departments, differences in the financial and human resources available to the local authorities, differences in the approach of the mayor, and the fact that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services which determines to a large extent the areas of activity and priorities of the departments did not have, at the time of the research, a policy on the subject of poverty. Evidence of this is the fact that many of the supportive services mentioned previously including those in the area of employment are financed through local authority funding, non-profit funding, and through private donations of foundations and citizens.

Table 1 and 2 map the perceptions of the participants of the study in three areas – the reasons for poverty, the preferred way to deal with it, and patterns of dealing with poverty that are used by local social service departments.

Table 1: **Reasons for poverty and the desired way of dealing with the problem**

Area	Perceived Reason	Perceived Way of Dealing with it
Individual/ Personal	<p data-bbox="515 456 730 511">Behavior that causes poverty</p> <ul data-bbox="515 524 799 633" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="515 524 624 547">• Laziness <li data-bbox="515 553 667 576">• “I deserve it” <li data-bbox="515 582 799 633">• Coming to terms with low-level standard of living <p data-bbox="515 651 699 675">Value orientation</p> <ul data-bbox="515 687 823 888" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="515 687 823 738">• Non-implementation of work value <li data-bbox="515 744 767 795">• Non-implementation of education value <li data-bbox="515 800 711 824">• Personal situation <li data-bbox="515 829 751 853">• Insufficient education <li data-bbox="515 859 703 882">• Low ability level 	<p data-bbox="871 456 1177 480">The responsibility of the poor</p> <ul data-bbox="871 493 1262 633" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="871 493 979 516">• Self-help <li data-bbox="871 522 1038 546">• Personal effort <li data-bbox="871 551 1230 575">• Doing everything possible to work <li data-bbox="871 580 1262 633">• Educating children to work and get an education <p data-bbox="871 651 1166 675">Social services responsibility</p> <ul data-bbox="871 687 1262 833" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="871 687 1209 711">• Help those who help themselves <li data-bbox="871 717 1190 740">• Raise motivation, show ability <li data-bbox="871 746 1219 797">• Equip the population with coping skills <li data-bbox="871 802 1262 833">• Assist people in raising income levels
Structural- Social	<ul data-bbox="515 906 791 1021" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="515 906 751 930">• Member of a minority <li data-bbox="515 935 711 959">• Born into poverty <li data-bbox="515 964 791 1021">• Poverty is an integral part of society 	
Local and national policy	<ul data-bbox="515 1039 842 1153" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="515 1039 727 1062">• Economic ideology <li data-bbox="515 1068 842 1092">• Priority in resource distribution <li data-bbox="515 1097 791 1121">• Transfer allowance policy <li data-bbox="515 1126 667 1153">• Salary policy 	<p data-bbox="871 1039 1238 1062">National government responsibility</p> <ul data-bbox="871 1075 1246 1306" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="871 1075 1246 1099">• Support for assistance organizations <li data-bbox="871 1104 1198 1128">• Programs for surviving poverty <li data-bbox="871 1133 1158 1184">• Giving appropriate transfer allowances <li data-bbox="871 1190 1182 1241">• Tightening transfer allowance eligibility <li data-bbox="871 1246 1174 1270">• Adult professional retraining <li data-bbox="871 1275 1126 1299">• Investment in education <p data-bbox="871 1324 1177 1348">Local authority responsibility</p> <ul data-bbox="871 1361 1262 1445" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="871 1361 1214 1385">• Developing employment sources <li data-bbox="871 1390 1262 1414">• Working on a multi-system local level <li data-bbox="871 1419 1118 1445">• Community organizing <p data-bbox="871 1470 1150 1521">Social services department responsibility</p> <ul data-bbox="871 1534 1254 1581" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="871 1534 1254 1557">• Presenting status report to authorities <li data-bbox="871 1563 1062 1581">• Pooling resources

Table 2: Perceived responsibility versus actual coping mechanisms

Perceived departmental responsibility for dealing with poverty	Actual services given to the population including poor people
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Help those who help themselves ▪ Raise motivation levels, show abilities ▪ Equipping the population with coping skills ▪ Assisting people to increase their incomes ▪ Present a status report to the authorities ▪ Pooling resources 	<p>Services focusing on the individual and family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Strengthening self-image ▪ Strengthening parenting skills ▪ Strengthening household management skills ▪ Strengthening economic skills ▪ Providing emotional support to the newly poor ▪ Family therapy ▪ Using resources efficiently (by volunteers) <p>Services focusing on work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Work retraining ▪ Preparing individuals for work ▪ Job placement ▪ Employment search workshops ▪ Employment negotiation services <p>Meeting basic needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assistance with food, medicines, clothing, etc. <p>Supplying information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Presenting a status report

4. *Summary and Conclusions*

There are a number of components that characterize the way in which department heads perceive the nature of poverty, its sources, ways of dealing with it, as well as the role of the local social service department in dealing with it. The following is a summary:

A) Perceived causes for poverty. The department heads attributed poverty to a number of factors but the emphasis was placed on the characteristics of the individual who lives in poverty: personal traits, human capital, conditions and circumstances of their personal lives, place of birth, and their value systems. It was also found that the heads related to external conditions connected to the economic situation of the country as an influence on the employment situation, and on government policies for various issues, like the level of transfer allowances from the National Insurance Institute and the eligibility criteria, discrimination in the resource distribution, the extent of employment sources, and the supply of work places.

The heavy emphasis placed on characteristics of poor people as a cause of poverty and as influencing their chances of raising themselves out of poverty to a large extent is the result of the influence of the individual professional approach which most social workers have adopted. This approach emphasizes individual responsibility and espouses individual therapy as a way of improving the situation. This professional approach matches the neo-liberal ideology whose influence on social policy makers in Israel has grown in recent years. The perception regarding individual responsibility is not foreign to Zionist-socialist ideology which was dominant in this country for many years and emphasized the importance of work as a means of personal and societal change. For this reason the impact of the perception that socioeconomic external influences are the central

causes of the creation of poverty is not dominant among department heads.

B) Perceived ways of dealing with poverty. It was found that the approach of department heads in this area was influenced by three main starting points which are interconnected: an awareness of the great importance of the value of work; a belief in the widespread professional perception that those who help themselves are to be helped; and an adoption of the individual professional therapeutic approach. Poverty is seen as more of an individual problem of the poor themselves and not as a societal problem that needs a wide systemic approach. Their relating to ways of dealing with poverty connected to changes on the overall national or municipal level was only partial. The following are details of the three main points:

1) **Recognizing the importance of the value of work** is an underlying thread that connects between the perceived reasons for poverty and the ways of dealing with it. On the general level, the causes for poverty that came up in the research (except for two social-structural reasons) were connected to work, like: personal attributes such as laziness, non-integration into the labor market as a result of low education, or the perception that the policy of transfer allowances is an obstacle to going out to work.

The importance that is given to work reflects its centrality as a basic value in Israeli society. It is differentiated from other values in four ways: it is generally accepted by the public; there is little opposition to it; it is deeply rooted in the society history; and, it does not relate to any specific activity (Yishai, 1999). In the approach of department heads it was found that in a society where work is a central and basic value, those who do not identify with and operate by this societal value will be poor. Furthermore, since such a person does not operate by societal values, the assistance that should come to him should be minimal. In light of this, it is also important to understand

why the department heads considered work as a social obligation and not as a social right.

The way in which the individual relates to work was presented by the department heads as the most important criterion in determining whether a person should receive assistance. In this context, it is important to mention the distinction department heads made between four types of poor people: those who cannot work due to understandable reasons; the chronically poor; the newly poor; and, the working poor. That is to say: those who deserve to be helped are the poor who cannot work because of reasons like old age or disability and those who would like to work. It should be noted that their reference to the group of working poor was minor since they have not been seen – until recently – as a target population. It is also possible that the department heads were not sufficiently aware of the existence of the working poor population, since it runs counter to the belief that works removes one from poverty.

2) **The individual approach base.** The importance that department heads attribute to work reflects their attitudes regarding personal responsibility. Amongst the five areas that make up how they see responsibility for dealing with poverty included in Table 2, three related directly to the individual and his integration in his environment and two other areas related to the individual indirectly. A central characteristic of the role perception of social services is to focus on strengthening individual skills and the family as a key to dealing with poverty. Improving the functioning of the family is a central component that should characterize the work of the social service department not only in relation to populations who are, in retrospect, classified as poor but also in relation to the general population that is targeted by the department. Furthermore, the individual approach leads to the departments' focusing on specific problems of those living in poverty and not the phenomenon of poverty as a common problem to different populations who receive services from the department.

This delineation explains on the one hand the variety of programs to assist individuals and families living in poverty (food, health, clothing, paying exceptional bills, medicines, and more) and, on the other hand the fact that at the time of the writing of this work there were no overarching programs to deal with the causes of poverty. This delineation is expressed in the fact that there were no special departmental teams with the mission of dealing with poverty as a social phenomenon.

3) **Helping those who help themselves.** The stress on the work value and the individual approach blends well with the other perceptions that have been adopted by department heads – that there is a need to focus on helping those who help themselves. This refers to those living in poverty as well as other populations. With regard to those living in poverty, this principle relates to the importance of work and emphasizes the perception of personal responsibility. In addition, this principle creates a distinction between several types of poor people: those who do not work because they are not able to work; those who do not work and do not make the effort to find work despite the fact that they might be able to do so – the chronically poor; the working poor who do not make an effort to improve their situation; the newly poor who have worked and would like to work but are unable to find employment. This distinction is a basis for different programs for different types of poor people. For worthy poor, there are workshops to assist in finding employment and raising self-image while for the not-worthy poor only their basic needs are provided. The services of the social service departments in the area of poverty reflect these principles.

C) The role of the local social service departments in dealing with poverty. The findings of the study point to the basic starting point that directs the majority of department heads. Poverty as a societal problem is not an area within their field of responsibility and those

who live in poverty are not seen as a defined target population. Their responsibility is to deal with people with different types of distress including poverty. As such they deal with those living in poverty the same as they deal with other populations. Treatment with the general population is guided by the following principles: encouraging integration into the labor force, helping those who help themselves, and giving individuals coping tools.

The set of services provided by the departments show that the perception regarding departmental responsibility has two aspects: one that relates to creating the personal infrastructure through which the poor person can and should take personal responsibility for dealing with his poverty. This is the realization of the work value through programs that are related to improving skills, strengthening self-image and the like. The second perspective relates to activities that assist the state in performing its responsibility towards those living in poverty in two ways: providing information as warnings on the impact of policies and providing recommendations of changes that should be made in policies; and aiding non-profits that provide the poor with basic needs such as food, medicines and more. The support for non-profit organizations is seen by the department heads as one of the areas of responsibility of the government alone. It is important to note, that at the time of the research an important channel of work for the departments in the field of poverty was work with the various non-profit organizations that provide assistance in basic needs to the poor population.

The combination of characteristics noted previously limits the involvement of the local social service departments in the field of poverty principally to activities of an individual nature like personal assistance in surviving by providing food, medicines, and various other types of help; and assistance in rising out of poverty through giving individuals tools for integrating back into the world of work. That is, the department heads do not see the poor as a unique target

population and do not see poverty as a societal problem that requires an inclusive systemic approach. They do relate to the impact of poverty on the individual and the family and assist them in dealing with their distress.

In summary, the findings of the study point to three main **insights** regarding the role of local social service departments towards poverty:

- The department heads did not perceive poverty as a problem in their realm of responsibility nor did they see the poor as a target population requiring unique treatment. They do not deal with the phenomenon of poverty rather with the impact of it on the individual who they see or on a group of clients. The department heads deal more with assistance to those who live in poverty to help them to survive and do not put effort into raising them out of poverty.
- The department heads made a distinction between the chronically poor, the newly poor, and the working poor. This distinction is a unifying thread through all the findings beginning with the perception of the cause of poverty and ways of dealing with it and the actual activities and programs implemented. At the basis of this distinction is the explanation for the way in which the individual poor person relates to work as a social value and a behavioral code.
- In actuality the social service departments of the local authorities give services to poor individuals on the basis of an individual approach and the recognition that there should be help primarily for those who help themselves.

Conclusions: The findings of the study indicate that in order for the local social service departments to fulfill a significant role in dealing with poverty they have to change their approach on a very basic level and stop concentrating on individual-family treatment in favor of

developing an approach that combines four basic professional approaches: individual, family, community, and policy.

For this purpose, the local social service departments must recognize that poverty is a social problem within their area of responsibility and that all types of poor people should be a target population for them. Likewise there must be a basic change in the process of training social workers including integrating the subject of poverty into the framework of their programs and studies.

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