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# UNIT 1 SOCIAL ACTION: CONCEPT AND PRINCIPLES

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit seeks to help you to understand the concept and scope of social action. It also covers the principles of social action. After reading this unit you would be able to understand broadly the skills required by a social actionist to carry out social action. In the end, the unit also deals with the critical issues pertinent to social workers' involvement in social action. This unit seeks to help you to understand the concept and scope of social action. It also covers the principles of social action. After reading this unit you would be able to understand broadly the skills required by a social actionist to carry out social action. In the end, the unit also deals with the critical issues pertinent to social workers' involvement in social action.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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In professional social work, six methods are identified to work effectively with people. Among them three are basic /primary methods. They are: casework, group work and community organisation. In day-to-day practice, social workers use these three methods of working with people – casework with individual clients, group work with small groups and community organisation with sociologically definable communities. In addition, there are three secondary or allied methods of social work. They are: social action, social work research and social welfare administration. Social action seeks the betterment of masses through social legislation, propaganda and appropriate action programmes. When there is a need to bring about some change in the social structure or to prevent the negative change from happening, which may influence the general population or a large number of people, social action comes into play. *Narmada Bachao Andolan* is one of the finest examples of social action carried out for the betterment of the masses. Let us look into the concept of social action in some detail.

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## 1.2 CONCEPT OF SOCIAL ACTION

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Social action is considered an auxiliary method of professional social work. As one of the methods of working with people, it has remained a debatable issue among the social work professionals. Social action is a method of social work used for mobilizing masses in order to bring about structural changes in the social system or to prevent adverse changes. It is an organised effort to change or improve social and economic institutions. Some of the social problems like dowry system, destruction of natural resources, alcoholism, poor housing, health, etc. can be tackled through social action.

As a method of professional social work, social action has remained an issue with wide ranging of opinions regarding its scope, strategies and tactics to be used, its status as a method and its relevance to social work practice. Mary Richmond was the first social worker to use the word 'social action' in 1922. She defines social action as "mass betterment through propaganda and social legislation". However, Sydney Maslin (1947) limits the scope of social action by considering it as a process of social work mainly concerned with securing legislation to meet mass problems. Baldwin broadens the scope of social action by emphasizing on bringing about structural changes in the social system through social action. Baldwin (1966) defines social action as "an organised effort to change social and economic institutions as distinguished from social work or social service, the fields which do not characteristically cover essential changes in established institutions. Social action covers movements of political reforms, industrial democracy, social legislation, racial and social justice, religious freedom and civic liberty and its techniques include propoganda, research and lobbying". In the same line Friedlander (1977) defines social action as an individual, group or community effort within the framework of social work philosophy and practice that aims to achieve social progress, to modify social policies and to improve social legislation and health and welfare services. Similar views are expressed by Lee (1937) who says "social action seems to suggest efforts directed towards changes in law or social structure or towards the initiation of new movements for the modification of the current social practices".

According to Coyle (1937) social action is the attempt to change the social environment in ways, which will make life more satisfactory. It aims to affect not individuals but social institutions, laws, customs, communities. Fitch (1940) considers social action as legally permissible action by a group (or by an individual trying to promote group action) for the purpose of furthering objectives that are both legal and socially desirable. A broad outlook has also been given by Hill (1951) who describes social action as "organised group effort to solve mass social problems or to further socially desirable objectives by attempting to influence basic social and economic conditions or practices".

Further, social action is a term applied to that aspect of organised social welfare actively directed towards shaping, modifying or maintaining the social institutions and policies that collectively constitute the social environment (Wickendon, 1956). Solender (1957) states that social action in the field of social work is a process of individual, group or inter-group endeavour, within the context of social work philosophy, knowledge and skill. Its objective is to enhance the welfare of society through modifying social policy and the functioning of social structure, working to obtain greater progress and better services. It is, therefore, evident that social action has been viewed as a method of bringing about structural changes along with social legislation.

Let us see some of the viewpoints of Indian social work authors about the definition and scope of social action. Moorthy (1966) states that the scope of social action includes work during catastrophic situations such as fires, floods, epidemics, famines, etc., besides securing social legislation. Nanawati (1965) views social action as “a process of bringing about the desired changes by deliberate group and community efforts. Social action does not end with the enactment of social legislation, but the execution of the policies was the real test of success or failure of social action”. The institute of Gandhian studies defines social action as the term commonly applied to social welfare activity which is directed towards shaping or modifying the social institutions and policies that constitute the social environment in which we live.

Similarly, Singh (1986) mentions that social action is a process in which conscious, systematic and organised efforts are made by some elites and/or people themselves to bring about change in the system which is instrumental in solving problems and improving conditions which limit the social functioning of weaker and vulnerable sections. It is, on the practical plane, nearer to social reform than to social revolution, which aims at smashing the entire existing social structure and to build up a new social set up. It is conflictual in nature but at the same time non-violent.

The objective of social action is the proper shaping and development of socio-cultural environment in which a richer and fuller life may be possible for all the citizens. Mishra (1992) has identified following goals of social action:

- 1) Prevention of needs;
- 2) Solution of mass problems;
- 3) Improvement in mass conditions;
- 4) Influencing institutions, policies and practices;
- 5) Introduction of new mechanisms or programmes;
- 6) Redistribution of power and resources (human, material and moral);
- 7) Decision-making;
- 8) Effect on thought and action structure; and
- 9) Improvement in health, education and welfare.

Thus, we see that social action is seen as a method of professional social work to be used to bring about or prevent changes in the social system through the process of making people aware of the socio-political and economic realities that influence or condition their lives. This is done by mobilising them to organise themselves for bringing about the desired results through the use of appropriately worked out strategies, with the exception of violence. Some examples of social action are socio-religious movements in the medieval period targeted against superstition, orthodox religious practices and various other social evils. The underlying philosophy of these social actions was humanitarian in nature based on the principles of justice, equality and fraternity.

### Check Your Progress I

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of this unit.

1) What is social action? Give two definitions of social action.

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2) Mention five social problems, which can be solved through social action.

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### 1.3 PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL ACTION

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Considering Gandhian principle of mobilisation as a typical example of the direct mobilisation model of social action Britto (1984) brings out the following principles of social action:

**The principle of Credibility Building:** It is the task of creating public image of leadership, the organisation and the participants of the movement as champions of justice, rectitude and truth. It helps in securing due recognition from the opponent, the reference-public and the peripheral participants of the movement.

Credibility can be built through one or many of the following ways:

- 1) *Gestures of goodwill towards the opponent:* To exemplify, when Gandhiji was in England, World War I broke out. He recruited students for service in a British Ambulance Corps on the Western Front. These gestures of goodwill towards the opponents projected the image of Gandhiji as a true humanitarian personality. His philosophy of non-violence facilitated the credibility building process among his opponents, the British.
- 2) *Example setting:* Dr. Rajendra Singh, the Magsaysay award winner of 2001, had set examples of water conservation in many villages of Rajasthan, by making check-dams, through mobilisation of village resources (manpower, cash and kind) before starting water conservation movement at a much larger scale.
- 3) *Selection of typical, urgently felt problems for struggles:* The leaders gain credibility if they stress on the felt needs of the people. Scarcity of water has remained one of the pressing problems of the people of Rajasthan. When Dr. R. Singh initiated his intervention on this issue, his credibility was automatically established.

- 4) *Success*: Successful efforts help in setting up credibility of the leader and the philosophy he/she is preaching. Seeing the successful work of Singh in certain villages of Rajasthan, State government also came forward to extend its support. Local leaders from various other villages and NGO professionals also approached him for help.

**Principle of Legitimation:** Legitimation is a continuous process of convincing the target group and the general public that the movement-objectives are morally right. The ideal would be making a case for the movement as a moral imperative. Leaders of the movement might use theological, philosophical, legal-technical, public opinion paths to establish the tenability of the movement's objectives. Before launching the programme, the leaders justify their action. Subsequently, as the conflict exhilarates to higher stages and as the leader adds new dimension to their programme, further justification is added and fresh arguments are put forth. Such justification is not done by leaders alone. In the course of their participation, followers too, contribute to the legitimation process. Following are the three approaches to legitimation:

- 1) *Theological and religious approach to legitimation*: Gandhiji, used this approach during freedom movement. He appealed to serve *dharma* by revolting against injustice of Britishers.
- 2) *Moral approach to legitimation*: People associated in the Campaign Against Child Labour, through peaceful rallies, persuasive speeches, use of media, organising, drawing competition among school children, have helped to create an environment against child abuse in the country. As a result, employing children in any occupation is considered morally wrong and it becomes a moral obligation to all conscious citizens to make sure that all children below the age of 14 years go to school instead of earning a livelihood.
- 3) *Legal-technical approach to legitimation*: People engaged with the 'Campaign for People's Right to Health' have based their argument on the human rights issues, fundamental rights and government's commitment to 'Health for All'. It gives credibility to the movement.

**Principle of Dramatisation:** Dramatisation is the principle of mass mobilisation by which the leaders of a movement galvanize the population into action by emotional appeals to heroism, sensational news-management, novel procedures, pungent slogans and such other techniques. Almost every leader mobilising the masses, uses this principle of dramatisation. Tilak, Marx, Guevara, Periyar and the Assam agitation leaders, resorted to this principle. Some of the mechanisms of dramatisation could be:

- 1) *Use of songs*: Catchy songs, which put forth the cause of a movement, create a dramatic effect. During freedom struggle, at Bardoli, local talent was tapped to compose songs to stimulate the enthusiasm of the people. Several choirs were trained and they travelled from village to village in a bullock cart to sing satyagrahic hymns at numerous meetings.
- 2) *Powerful speeches*: This is also a crucial way of motivating the masses and creating drama-effect. Gandhiji's appeal to sacrifice and martyrdom was thrilling and it had a special appeal for the youth to work for this cause.
- 3) *Role of women*: Making prominent women lead marchers was a technique which gave a dramatic effect to the movement. At Rajkot, Kasturba Gandhi herself inaugurated the civil disobedience movement by courting arrest first.
- 4) *Boycott*: Boycott is also an effective way of influencing public opinion both when the effort is successful and when it is crushed. Picketing and '*hartals*'— voluntary closure of shops and other organisations, were used by Gandhiji to dramatise the issue.

- 5) *Slogans: Bharat chodo, Jal hi Jeevan, Say no to Drugs, HIV/AIDS– knowledge is prevention, etc.* are some of the slogans used to give dramatic effect to various social movements.

**Principle of Multiple Strategies:** There are two basic approaches to development: conflictual and non-conflictual. Taking the main thrust of a programme, one can classify it as political, economic or social. The basket principle indicates the adoption of a multiple strategy, using combined approaches and also a combination of different types of programmes. Zeltman and Duncan have identified four development strategies from their experience of community development. These have been framed for use in social action. They are:

- 1) *Educational strategy:* In this strategy, the prospective participants are educated at the individual, group and mass level. This is one of the basic requirements of social action. People or target groups are given necessary information about the issue. By creating awareness people are motivated and persuaded to participate in the movement. During campaign against child labour, a network of NGOs working with children was developed and these NGOs in tune created awareness in their respective areas through educational strategy. Education by demonstration is an important aspect of this principle. Demonstration has deep impact on the knowledge retention of the target population.
- 2) *Persuasive strategy:* Persuasive strategy is the adoption of a set of actions/procedures to bring about changes by reasoning, urging and inducing others to accept a particular viewpoint. Gandhiji used this strategy by constantly seeking opportunities for dialogue with his opponents. At every rally, stress was laid on winning new converts by oratory and gentle presentation of arguments.
- 3) *Facilitative strategy:* This refers to a set of procedures and activities to facilitate the participation of all sections of society in the mass movement. The programmes devised by the Gandhians were often so simple and devoid of any risk that even children could imitate them and participate in the National Liberation Movement. In salt-satyagraha, Gandhiji did not go into the technicalities of salt making. He simply asked the followers to make consumable salt by boiling the sea-water. Its simplicity did facilitate greater participation.
- 4) *Power strategy:* It involves the use of coercion to obtain the desired objectives. The forms of coercion may vary. Gandhiji used social ostracism as one of the techniques of power strategy.

**Principle of Dual Approach:** Any activist has to build counter-systems or revive some unused system, which is thought to be beneficial to the mobilised public on a self-help basis without involving the opponent. This is a natural requirement consequent upon the attempt to destroy the system established/maintained by the opponents. Gandhian constructive work programme performed such a function, in a small measure, together with conflictual programmes of satyagrahis. This cooperative effort indicates that Gandhians adopted or attempted to a dual approach in their mobilization.

**Principle of Manifold Programmes:** It means developing a variety of programmes with the ultimate objective of mass mobilization. These can be broadly categorized into three parts: Social, Economic and Political programme. Dr. Rajendra Singh (well-known water conservationist from Alwar district of Rajasthan) has taken up the issue of water conservation as a composite of manifold programmes. His water conservation helped the villagers,

particularly women, who had to go miles to fetch water. It helped in better development of crops, better animal husbandry, implying more economic benefits. During the movement, there were direct and indirect conflict resolutions with the local leaders, panchayat bodies and state government.

### Check Your Progress II

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of this unit.

1) Enlist the principles of social action given by Britto.

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2) What are the different strategies given in the Principle of multiple strategies?

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### 1.4 SKILLS INVOLVED IN SOCIAL ACTION

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After understanding the concept and principles of social action, let us take a look at the skills needed by social workers for social action. These skills are no different from the general skills; professional social worker uses these skills by combining the ethics and principles of professional social work. However, a social worker using social action, as a method of social work, requires certain skills; the more important among these are briefly described below.

**Relational Skills:** The social worker should have skills for building rapport with individuals and groups and skills for maintaining these relations. He/she should be able to develop and maintain professional relationship with the clients. The social worker should have the ability to identify the leadership qualities among the clientele and should be skillful to harness these qualities for social action. Along with this working harmoniously with the established local leaders is also needed. He/she should be able to deal with intra-group and inter-group conflicts effectively. The ability to diagnose problematic behaviour among the clients and providing counselling is needed to develop and maintain integration within the community. The social worker should identify tension-producing situations and diffuse them before they become serious. Developing and maintaining cordial relations with other agencies and NGOs working in the same geographical area and those working for similar causes is also required.

**Analytical and Research Skills:** The social worker should have the ability to objectively study the socio-cultural and economic characteristics of the community. He/she should be able to find out the pressing problems and needs of the clientele. He/she should be able to analyze the social problems, the factors contributing to the social problems and its ramifications on the social, economic, political, ideological, cultural and ecological aspects of life. He/she should be able to conduct research and/or understand the likely impact of research studies in a functional sense. Added to this, the social worker should be able to facilitate the community people to speak out their own felt needs and prioritize them. The social worker should never try to impose his/her own understanding of the social situation and problems on the community.

**Intervention Skills:** After need identification, the social worker should have the ability to help the clientele chalk out practical intervention strategies to deal with the problem. The social worker should provide various options to the clientele and help them in analyzing pros and cons of each option for taking up proper steps. Social action may require 'confrontation' with authorities. The social worker must inform the community about the consequences of taking up hard steps like sit-ins, boycotts, strikes, etc. The social worker should be able to maintain the desired level of feeling of discontent and emotional surcharge to bring about the necessary change, enthusiasm and courage among the community people for a fairly long time so as to minimize the possibility of failure of mass mobilization before the set objectives are achieved. The social worker should be able to maintain patience and composed behaviour as he/she has to deal with emotional balance of the clientele in a rational way.

Added to this, the social worker should have the ability to create the environment wherein individuals and groups can actively participate. The interventions should be developed keeping in mind the pressing need, resources (human and material) and socio-cultural milieu of the community. He/she should be able to improvise situations for targeted interventions.

**Managerial Skills:** The social worker also needs the knowledge and ability to handle organisation, which may be the outcome of the institutionalization of people's participation. He/she should be able to coordinate and collaborate with various groups and local leaders so as to unite the clientele for the required intervention. He/she should be skillful enough to make policies and programmes, programme planning, coordinating, recording, budgeting and elementary accounting and maintenance of various records. He/she should be able to mobilize internal/external resources in terms of money, men, materials, equipment, etc. The social worker also requires the skills of supervising human and material resources and its effective utilization for the welfare and development of the targeted community.

**Communication Skills:** These skills are highly crucial for social action. The social worker should have the ability to develop effective public relations with local organisations and leaders. He/she should be able to effectively communicate verbally (including public speaking) and in writing as well. The social worker should be able to deliver or identify people who can deliver powerful speeches. He/she should be able to devise indoor/outdoor media for effectively communicating with the target audiences. The social worker should be able to evaluate and use folk and mass media suited to diverse groups. These skills are used for developing slogans and motivational songs, speeches and IEC materials for mass mobilization. The social worker should have skills to educate, facilitate, negotiate and persuade for necessary actions at needed places.

**Training Skills:** The social worker should be able to train and facilitate local leaders and the identified leaders for taking up the in-charge of mass mobilization and confrontation with the authorities. He/she should be able to train selected people at the local level aimed at imparting knowledge about the social issue taken up for action and the modalities of carrying out the intervention including the 'confrontation process'. These people should be trained for creating public opinion for or against the social issue taken up and identify and involve people in social action. They should also be trained to utilize social action strategies and tactics (confrontation, persuasion, negotiation, boycott, etc.) without the use of violence.

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## 1.5 CRITICAL ISSUES

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Let us now take a look at some of the critical issues, which influence the success of mass mobilization and in turn, the achievement of set goals through social action. As mentioned earlier social action uses a number of strategies and tactics (details of these would be given in subsequent units) and envisages the active role of many of stakeholders. This multiplicity of strategies and involvement of different stakeholders demand meticulous planning and careful implementation. If not addressed beforehand, these issues may lead to disruption of the process and sometimes failure of planned interventions. The issues that a professional social worker needs to keep in mind are:

**Empowerment of the Clientele:** The central theme behind any social issue for which social action is being carried out is the 'empowerment of the client group or the community'. In the process of social action, the group whose cause is being advocated must get empowered and develop the skills and strengths to gain access to common resources for the development of the community. The end result of the social action should be equitable partnerships between the interested stakeholders, allowing democratic decision-making and actual access and usage of denied resources. The social worker must, from time to time, evaluate and monitor the progress of social action in relation to the overall goal of empowerment. Any deviation from this goal may lead to failure of the philosophy of social action and accumulation of power and resources in the hands of a few selfish people. It would mean injustice to the entire group or community for whose cause social action is being carried out.

**Dealing with Groupism:** Social action questions the unjust power equations and unfair distribution of resources. It implies confrontation with those having power and resources. In the process, certain groups may develop having members with vested interests which might not be apparent. These groups may try to take lead and influence the social worker to be on their side. Any opposition may raise inter-group tensions and conflicts. Depending upon the situation, the counter attack can be very fierce and challenging. At the level of planning itself, the social workers must foresee this possibility and handle the situation very judiciously and tactfully.

**Accountability:** The professional social worker has to ensure that there is consistent and continued communication among all stakeholders and a process of clear accountability and transparency is maintained in order to give the cause positive legitimacy. Any miscommunication or negative communication may result in losing the credibility, and in turn, may affect the entire social action process.

**Building Right Alliances:** Social action process calls for participation of various stakeholders for the cause or issue. It is essential that the social worker uses skills to understand the perceptions of these stakeholders and their levels of interests in social action. Only then the social worker will be able to utilize their capabilities and skills in the social action process effectively. While doing so the social worker may have to form alliances and

partnerships with several people and organisations to further the cause. Therefore, he/she needs to be careful in guarding against those who may use the activities for their own gain and may even dilute the cause and thereby defeat the goal of social action. Indeed giving chance to those who may jeopardize the cause may legitimate them as genuine social actionists, when in reality, they would be fostering their personal rather than the group cause.

**Balancing Micro-Macro Issues:** Social action often entails a shift from the micro to macro in addressing policy change and also legislative alterations. This can be illustrated by the example of an organisation, which has been working with street children providing them with education. However, as the work progresses the organisation shifts towards developing coalitions with several such organisations with regard to formulation of and change in child related policies.

**Remaining Apolitical:** Social action entails a clarity and understanding of political environment. However, politics does not mean party politics or formal politics. Any kind of political affiliations of the social worker will on the one delegitimize the activities and at the same time jeopardize the real cause by ensuring the selling out of the cause for the promotion of one party interest rather than group interest.

### Check Your Progress III

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of this unit.

1) Why skills to relate to the people effectively are needed in Social Action?

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2) What are the cautions a social worker needs to keep in mind while carrying out social action? Answer very briefly.

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## 1.6 LET US SUM UP

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Social action is a secondary method of professional social work. It is used for mobilizing masses in order to bring about structural changes in the social system or to prevent negative changes. Certain social problems like ecological balancing, bonded labour, child labour, women empowerment, substance abuse, etc., can be tackled through social action.

The primary objective of social action is to bring about solutions to mass problems, improve mass conditions and redistribute power and resources (human, material and moral).

Principles of social action are: a) principle of credibility building; b) principle of legitimization; c) principle of dramatization; d) principle of multiple strategies; e) principle of dual approach; and f) principle of manifold programmes.

A social worker using social action, as a method of social work, requires certain skills. They are: a) relational skills i.e. to relate effectively with the people to build rapport and credibility building; b) analytical skills i.e. ability to analyze the social situation and social problem objectively and scientifically; c) intervention skills are needed to help the clientele chalk out practical intervention strategies to deal with the social problem; d) managerial skills are required to coordinate and collaborate with various groups and local leaders so as to unite the clientele for the required intervention; e) communication skills to educate, facilitate, negotiate and persuade for necessary actions at needed places; f) training skills i.e. the social worker should be able to train leaders for taking up the charge of mass mobilization and confrontation with the authorities.

Some critical issues which influence the success of social action are: empowerment of the clientele which is the inherent goal of any social action, dealing with intra and inter group conflicts, accountability and transparency, building alliances with the 'right' people and organisations, shifting vision from micro to macro problems and avoiding political involvement.

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## 1.7 KEY WORDS

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<b>Social Action</b>	:	It is a method of social work to bring about or prevent changes in the social system through a process of making people aware of the social cause and mobilizing them to bringing about the desired structural changes in the social system through the use of appropriately worked out strategies, with the exception of violence.
<b>Strategies and Tactics</b>	:	Plan or approach or method or device or scheme are included in strategies and tactics showing discontent through confrontation, sit-ins, boycott, rally, etc., and negotiation and persuasion.

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## 1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress I

- 1) Social action is a method of professional social work, which is used for mobilizing masses in order to bring about structural changes in the social system or to prevent negative changes.  
Two definitions of social action are:
  - a) Social action is mass betterment through propaganda and social legislation (Richmond, Mary 1922).
  - b) Social action is the efforts directed towards changes in law or social structure or towards the initiation of new movements for the modification of the current social practices (Lee, 1937).
- 2) Five social problems, which can be solved through social action, are:
  - a) Child labour
  - b) Human rights
  - c) Poverty
  - d) Drug abuse
  - e) Ecological balancing

### Check Your Progress II

- 1) The principles of Social Action given by Britto are:
  - a) Principle of credibility building;
  - b) Principle of legitimization;
  - c) Principle of dramatization;
  - d) Principle of multiple strategies;
  - e) Principle of dual approach; and

- f) Principle of manifold programmes.
- 2) The different strategies given in the Principle of multiple strategies are:
- a) Educational strategy
  - b) Persuasive strategy
  - c) Facilitative strategy
  - d) Power strategy

### **Check Your Progress III**

- 1) Relational skills are highly crucial for social action. They help in building and maintaining rapport with the clientele. He/she is able to do group work and casework effectively with the judicious use of this skill. The next stage is community organisation, which also requires use of professional relation in an adequate manner to organise the people for social action.
- 2) Certain cautions a social worker needs to keep in mind while carrying out social action are:
- a) Keeping empowerment of the clientele as the inherent goal,
  - b) Dealing with intra and inter group conflicts,
  - c) Accountability and transparency,
  - d) Building alliances with the 'right' people and organisations,
  - e) Shifting vision from micro to macro problems, and
  - f) Remaining apolitical.