

A Tribute to Prof James Midgley (1944-2026)



We deeply mourn the passing of a global scholar, academic leader, mentor, colleague, and dear friend, Prof James Midgley, who passed away on 21 June 2026 in California. While the loss of such an extraordinary scholar and person is immeasurable, we embrace the enduring legacy of his commitment to scholarship, social justice, and human development. Through his seminal scholarship, he profoundly shaped the fields of social welfare, social work, social policy, international social work, and social development.

Until his passing, he was Professor at the Graduate School at the University of California, Berkeley. He served as Dean of the School of Social Welfare from 1997 to 2006 and held the Harry and Riva Specht Professor of Public Social Services from 1997 until his retirement from full-time academic work in 2016. Prior to joining Berkeley, he served as Dean of the School of Social Work and subsequently as Associate Vice Chancellor at Louisiana State University. Earlier in his career, he taught at the University of Cape Town and the London School of Economics.

Prof Midgley remained an active and prolific scholar throughout his career and until the very end of his life, exemplifying a lifelong commitment to intellectual inquiry and scholarship. In the week of his passing, his final scholarly contribution appeared in *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* (2026, Vol. 62 No. 2), in which he reflected on the past, present, and future of social development. The same volume also includes a review by Danyschka Jacobs of his final book, *Social Protection: Growth, welfare and equity* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2026), which aptly captures the breadth and depth of James Midgley's scholarship and enduring contribution to the field.

As he reflects in his final article, his upbringing in South Africa, studies at the University of Cape Town, practice experience as a social worker, and postgraduate studies at the University of Cape Town and the London School of Economics profoundly shaped his intellectual journey. He often acknowledged the influence of Professor Richard Titmuss at the London School of Economics in nurturing his interest in social policy and social development. These formative experiences inspired a body of scholarship that would have a far-reaching influence across the world, particularly in the Global South. In South Africa, his work provided an important foundation for the transition from an apartheid welfare system to a developmental, inclusive, and human rights-based approach to social welfare.

He has published widely on issues of social development, social policy, social work, and international social welfare, and edited many books in these fields. Among his earlier books, the best known was *Professional Imperialism: Social Work in the Third World* (Heinemann Educational Books, London, 1981), which challenged the profession to rethink its approach to international exchanges. His book *Social Security, Inequality and the Third World* (John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1984) was the first book on social security in the developing world. His seminal book, *Social Development: The Developmental Perspective in Social Welfare* published by Sage in 1995, was fundamental in transforming social welfare policy towards a developmental social welfare approach. In his book, *Inequality, Social Protection and Social Justice* (Edward Elgar Publications, 2020), he contends that social protection schemes can be effectively used by governments to redistribute resources, reduce inequalities and create socially just societies. He further advanced this argument in his final book, *Social protection: Growth, welfare and equity* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2026), eloquently positioning social protection as an investment in social development. In doing so, he leaves a legacy for social welfare, social policy and social work in addressing poverty and inequality. The global reach of his work is reflected in the translation of his books into multiple languages, including Japanese, Spanish, Korean, Bahasa-Malaysian, Bahasa-Indonesian, and Chinese, extending his influence across diverse regions and generations of scholars.

Prof James Midgley was a sought-after keynote speaker at international and national conferences, professional events, and distinguished named lectures at universities around the world, including the Dan Sanders Memorial Lecture (1993); the Peter Hodge Memorial Lecture (1994); the Kenneth Pray Lecture (1995); the John F. Roatch Lecture (1997); the Allen T. Burns Lecture (1997); the Bernard and Rhoda Sarnat Lecture (2000); the 8th Annual Herman D. Stein Lecture in International Social Welfare (2006); and the Run Run Shaw *Distinguished Visiting Scholar Lecture* (2016). Through these engagements and numerous invited presentations, he inspired generations of scholars, practitioners, and students.

His work received numerous academic and professional honours throughout his career. Among these, he was honoured by the Global Commission of the Council on Social Work Education with its International Partnership Award in 2006. In the same year, he received the Berkeley Citation for distinguished service to the University of California, Berkeley, the highest honour bestowed by the University. In 2010, he was elected as one of the inaugural Fellows of the newly established American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare. In 2018, a special issue of the *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* (Vol. 45, No. 4) comprising articles by colleagues and former students, was dedicated to his work on social development. He held honorary professorial appointments at Nihon Fukushi University in Japan, the University of Johannesburg in South Africa, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and Sun Yat-sen University in China. He also received Honorary Doctorates from the University of Johannesburg, the Polytechnic University of Madrid in Spain and his alma mater, the University of Cape Town.

Prof James Midgley was a walking encyclopedia in his fields of scholarship. He had the remarkable ability to share scholarly wisdom in historical and contemporary contexts in a logical manner that evoked interest, curiosity, and excitement. His conversations inspired academics, practitioners, and students, always encouraging critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, research, and deeper understanding. He inspired us both in person and through his work, with his unwavering optimism and commitment to advancing efforts to address oppression, poverty, and deprivation across the world. We will dearly miss Prof James Midgley, not only as an icon and influential global scholar, but for his generous personhood and treasured friendship.

We extend our deepest condolences to his wife Dija, his sister, family, friends, colleagues, students, and all those whose lives he touched in profound ways.

Prof Antoinette Lombard, IASSW President