Chapter 13

Strategizing Social Work Response to Sustainable Development Goals Through Open and Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

As the national Governments are grappling with the SDGs, they can get benefitted by the rich pool of knowledge which professional social work has generated. The social work organizations are therefore fast emerging as major role players in developing countries where resources are scarce and change is immediately needed. India is home to one third of the extremely poor population of the world. It is a major challenge as the communities to be addressed are diverse in terms of level of development, ethnicity, socio economic profile, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Social work professionals can immensely contribute to bring such communities to mainstream. This is the reason why capacity building of professional social workers is a matter of concern particularly in developing countries. The conventional systems of education find themselves very unfavorably positioned to meet such educational demands. This chapter identifies the issues involved in social work education, describes its role to accomplish SDGs and explores the role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL).

BACKGROUND

The current paradigm of development views it as a continuous process, which is based much on the context of the target group, participation of various stakeholders and sustainability of the efforts. Development is defined more in terms of empowerment of individuals and as a process by which individuals are able to make informed choices and make optimum utilization of various resources for the benefit of the larger community. This requires an active participation from various sectors and strata of the society including the government agencies, non government agencies and the larger civil society. Thus, one of the most

important aspects of the development process is the degree of inclusiveness of all the stakeholders. It brings the inclusiveness at the core of the developmental paradigm.

Social work is a profession that began as a call to help the poor, the destitute, and the oppressed in rapidly changing societies. It continues today still pursuing that quest, perhaps with greater degree of responsibility than ever before. The United Nations in its Declaration envisions the roadmap for sustainable development goals in order to bring about sustainable and equitable development in the economic, social and environmental dimensions. The goals include eradicating extreme poverty, hunger, inequality within and between countries, access to justice and human rights, global peace and solidarity, conserving the environment and the natural resources, among others. The major concerns as envisaged in SDGs are already ingrained in the principles and values of social work. It is in this context that the social work discipline has gained a lot of prominence across the world.

The most widely used definitions of the concept of Professional Social Work states that social work is "a profession which promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance their well-being. Utilizing theories of human behavior and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work" (International Association of Schools of Social Work: 2001). Internationally social work professionals have been instrumental for initiating a global agenda between 2012 and 2016 (IFSW 2012) which have been a major landmark in this direction.

Social Work as Instrument of Change in Developing Countries

The Government alone is not capable to reach to communities. In recent times, this gap in state led development efforts has been filled by the Social Work Professionals, who are especially trained to carry out such developmental and Humanitarian work through scientifically designed methods, skills and techniques to work with individuals, families, groups and communities. Social Work professionals help in mediating the process of development as service providers, mobilisers, change agents and enablers to their clients. They are specially oriented and professionally trained to work creatively and innovatively to reach out to people, strengthen their livelihoods and support the process of community development. It makes social work a crucial ingredient to accomplish sustainable development goals (IFSW, 2012).

Though role of social work has been well recognized and understood across the world, such interventions have special relevance for developing countries which confront with scarce resources and poor infrastructural facilities (Jayasooria, 2016). Among all the developing countries, India inhabits most diverse set of disadvantaged communities, in terms of socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic variations. However the social work as a profession is yet to reach the required level of maturity in India. The social work has suffered primarily due to lack of professional environment. India is known for its unique philanthropic cultural traits, deeply ingrained in the psyche of the people. Such philanthropic work is quite often mistaken as social work in India which tends to narrow down the entire outlook.

Need of SDGs Embedded Training Initiatives for Social Workers

India has one sixth of the global population of SDG target groups (UN, 2016). Hence the fate of the SDGs will ultimately be decided by how India performs on this front. Social work professionals have immense opportunities and challenges in such a socio economic environment. Government has taken up this important issue seriously and non-governmental activities, largely managed by social workers

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