

Professional Social Work towards Social Development and Poverty Reduction (PROSOWO)



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List of Abbreviations

ASSWA	Association of schools of social work in Africa
CBOs	Community Based Organizations
CUAS	Carinthia University of Applied Sciences
FBOs	Faith Based Organizations
ISW	Institute of Social Work
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
PROSOWO	Promotion of Professional Social Work towards Social Development and Poverty Reduction
SWSA	Department of Social work and Social Administration of the Makerere University

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1. General Information

The Department of Social work and Social Administration of the Makerere University (SWSA) in Kampala, Uganda, is an academic unit engaged in teaching, research and innovation. The specific area is social work and social development. The purpose of this document is to present the experience made with the project “Promotion of Professional Social Work towards Social Development and Poverty Reduction in East Africa (PROSOWO)”. PROSOWO was developed under the auspices of the Austrian Partnership Programme in Higher Education and Research for Development. The project is an initiative of five partner institutions all of them involved in social work training at University level namely Makerere University (Uganda) (Mak), University of Nairobi (Kenya) (UoN), University of Rwanda (Rwanda) (UR), Institute of Social Work (Tanzania) (ISW) and Carinthia University of Applied Sciences (Austria) (CUAS). This project has been implemented from March 2011 to August 2014 in mentioned countries.



Chart 1 Localization of the experience

2. Context of the Experience

East Africa is marred by very high levels of poverty, disease and political and ethnic conflict. The human development indices range from 0.460 (Rwanda) to 0.541 (Kenya), with all the 4 countries ranked among the bottom 35 countries in terms of human development (UNDP, 2013). There are poor socio-economic outcomes, lack of infrastructure, environmental problems, gender inequality, and the devastating effects of the HIV/Aids pandemic on entire communities. This is amidst very poor or almost non-existent social protection services. The extended family and kinship systems that historically provided safety nets have been weakened by urbanisation, globalization and the sheer magnitude of

poverty and disease. The result is worsening conditions for particularly the most vulnerable groups including children, women and the elderly. All the major cities in the 4 countries have increasing numbers of children living on the streets. Due to ongoing war and conflict in this Great Lakes region and the far reaching effects of the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, there is also a challenge of refugees and internally displaced people who need reintegration and resettlement as well as psychosocial interventions. The region has also been under constant terrorist attacks and threats linked to the terrorist groups in Somalia. All these aspects paint a grim picture of the context in which social work operates and call for the need to strengthen the profession to effectively contribute towards addressing the humanitarian challenges in the region.

Social work is not widely recognised in the region yet the profession has an important role to play in addressing poverty and enhancing human function, as well as strengthening the delivery of human services. There has been limited capacity for training professional social workers and in some cases the educators themselves are not trained social workers. Capacity for research and generation of local scientific literature is grossly limited and as such the models that end up being adopted in the field may not necessarily be relevant. Another challenge relates to the gap between the social work education institutions and the social work agencies that implement programmes and yet working in concert would result in a synergistic relationship where education informs policy and practice and where practice knowledge and experiences inform the revision and appropriation of the social work curriculum. Field practice education, which is a major element of social work education has not been adequately organised due to this weak linkage between academic institutions and social work/social welfare agencies. Another reality has been the weak networking and linkages between social work training institutions within the region which undermines their voices at the regional and global levels and denies them an opportunity for mutual learning.

Apart from that, East Africa has one of the highest HIV/Aids prevalence rates in the world

and this, coupled with poverty creates a complex situation of human suffering in the region. Gender inequality including gender based violence, feminisation of poverty, lack of access to basic services that benefit women, unequal educational outcomes between women and men, and obvious income inequalities characterise the region. These are embedded in strong traditional cultures that place women in subordinate positions and deny them equality of opportunity. Gender inequality is as well reflected in the academic institutions where women and men are unequally represented in student enrolment, faculty and administrative positions. Given its professional foundation in human rights, social workers can play critical roles in addressing both gender inequality and HIV/Aids but they need to be grounded in both skill and theory in order to operate at a more professional level. Due to limited research and training capacity in social work in the region, social workers can only contribute towards addressing these challenges to a limited extent.

3. Main Characteristics of the Experience

The project evolved through initial informal contacts between potential partners, building on previous experiences of bilateral relationships particularly between the Northern partner Carinthia University of Applied Sciences (CUAS) and individual institutions e.g. Institute of Social Work (Tanzania) (ISW). Once the 4 different institutions had committed to the joint partnership, a consortium meeting was arranged in 2010 in Nairobi where all partners met and the project idea was developed into a fully-fledged proposal for funding. The respective partners collected ideas from the faculty at their respective institutions as well as key civil society organisations namely the National Association of Social Workers in order to refine the problem and propose the areas of intervention. Once the proposal had been approved for funding, there was an inception meeting held among the partners in order to streamline the modalities of the project implementation including setting up of administrative and reporting structures and developing a concrete work plan. Subsequently the project has been implemented in a participatory manner at every stage.

The overall project objective is to promote professional social work education and practice to effectively contribute to social development and poverty reduction and to achieving the MDGs in East Africa.

The specific objectives were...

- ...to strengthen the capacity of higher social work education institutions in the region through research, curriculum development and joint publications.
- ...to develop sustainable academic partnerships and networks in Africa and with Austria in social work training and research.
- ...to conduct research on the role of social work in poverty reduction.
- ...to develop a more relevant social work curriculum in alignment with national poverty reduction plans and social development strategies.
- ...to facilitate the process of drafting a discussion paper on regulating the social work profession for discussions with relevant government authorities.
- ...to share outcomes of the PROSOWO programme with the Austrian social work academia and development stakeholders.

The interlinked activities of the project included empirical research and publications, training and capacity building, curriculum review and development, building and strengthening partnerships and linkages, advocacy for the recognition and regulation of social work. Prior to the project, there was no existing partnership between any of the 4 East African institutions involved in this initiative in spite of the fact that they share similar contexts and the challenges confronting social work have many commonalities within these countries. Strengthening partnerships therefore aimed to enhance sharing of resources and materials including human and other material resources, social work curricula, undertaking joint initiatives to raise the profile of social work in the region, and information sharing. The specific activities undertaken in this regard included among others: staff exchanges, student and staff visits, joint launching of conferences and workshops and joint publications.

The empirical research involved the exploration and assessment of the status and role of social work in the region in order to provide crucial information for advocacy, curriculum review and development and knowledge generation. For this particular exercise, a combination of qualitative and quantitative tools was used in a participatory process to collect information of key stakeholders including social work practitioners, employers, clients, educators, students and policy makers. Also dissemination workshops and presentations were used as a crucial method for advocacy and strengthening networks.

In general, the project has been based on ongoing dialogue amongst partners and beneficiaries. Feedback and dissemination workshops have been conducted in the 4 countries to get information from stakeholders and streamline the way forward. In 2014, an international conference was held that synthesized the experiences and lessons learnt and provided opportunities for learning and future programming. The project also undergoes an annual evaluation and feedback from an external evaluator. The report plus the local stakeholder feedback has been crucial in informing subsequent planning.

4. Stakeholders and Partners – Roles and Responsibilities

Major stakeholders involved included academic institutions (educators, administrators and students), social work practitioners from government and non-governmental agencies, government ministries (policy makers), clients (service users) and professional associations.

The social work institutions in the respective partner countries are directly involved in the implementation of this project. Their tasks include project coordination, research, production and dissemination. The motivation for involvement for each of these partners is the realization of the shared challenges for social work in the East Africa region and the need to strengthen its capacity to contribute towards social development. The motivation for the Northern partner (CUAS) lies in the ability to draw lessons from social work in Africa and from the North-South collaborative partnerships.

Social work faculty and students in higher education institutions benefit through capacity building and curriculum development activities. Students participated in the review and evaluation of the curriculum and in data collection during the field research. They also acted as volunteers in workshops and conferences. Student exchange visits between the 5 participating institutions enhanced opportunities for knowledge sharing and exposure beyond the classroom. They were also main participants in the activities to mark the world social work day in Kampala – a major means of the profession's profiling and advocacy for recognition and regulation.

Social work practitioners and their agencies have been targeted with dissemination of ongoing developments in social work and social development. Thus they are better positioned to design poverty reduction strategies and programmes that will be more locally relevant and that will enable social workers to participate more effectively in the formulation, review and implementation of social policies and social development strategies.

Professional associations such as national associations of social workers in the respective countries have also been closely involved. Their contribution includes the Identification and profiling of social work practitioners, joint advocacy work for regulation of social work, as well as joint coordination of workshops and conference. The Association of schools of social work in Africa (ASSWA) has provided technical support and was also responsible for the review of manuscripts and abstracts and keynote speeches in conference. Social work associations will gain capacity through increased membership in international organizations such as the International Federation of Social Workers. (IFSW), and through national and regional social work consultative meetings that create opportunities for dialogue on professional matters and sharing best practice models.

Men, women and children (the clientele communities) benefit through streamlined service delivery and integration of their felt needs and suggestions in the social work training curriculum, thus making targeted

interventions by social workers more effective for poverty reduction and social development. They also gave testimonies of what social work means to them and how services could be strengthened.

NGOs, FBOs and CBOs as main employers of social workers contributed through information sharing, presentations in conference and fieldwork placements for national and exchange students.

Government ministries in their role as policy makers provide the mandate and framework for the intervention and help in fieldwork placements.

5. Impact of the Experience/ Practice

There has been increased capacity for research and scientific publications among the social work faculties. Several publications in form of books and journal articles have been completed jointly. Empirical research on the role of social work on poverty reduction and the realization of the MDGs, completed in 4 partner countries, was a “first of its kind” in East Africa. This research has provided relevant material on social work in Africa and includes key texts for teaching, practice and policy reference.

In addition, the project resulted in the acquisition of textbooks for libraries at the university of Nairobi and Makerere university which is positively impacting the quality of education.

The involvement of practitioners and clients in the process of empirical research as well as the social work conference in Kampala is helping to bridge gaps between the academic institutions, practitioners, agencies and clients. Increasingly agencies are more open to student placements for internships and to sharing their work for the use as case studies in teaching and scientific publications. Practitioners are also being invited as guest lecturers in the departments. Provision of space for various agencies to exhibit their products and their positive response during the conferences and workshops attests to such increasing collaboration between the university and the civil society. Additionally, strengthened ties with national association of social workers are providing an avenue for a united voice

towards the regulation of the profession. A fieldwork manual soon to be finalized with the input of educators, students and practitioners (agency supervisors) will be instrumental in streamlining the management and supervision of field practice education.

Successful dissemination took place by workshops at regional and international levels and by media, which raised the profile of social work in the region, and ongoing dialogue with government through line ministries is softening the ground for the development of a policy to regulate social work and thereby enhance its contribution to development + recognition. The ultimate benefit over the long term will be a strengthened profession that will more effectively advance social development and tackle issues of poverty and destitution in East Africa.

6. Lessons Learned and Recommendations

- Joint proposal development is crucial and bottom –up processes essential for success.
- Regional projects are good to achieve a broader impact, mutual learning, encouragement, future collaborations and sustainability.
- Partnerships need an initial period and opportunities to bond before actual project implementation (e.g. through inception workshops).
- Equal treatment of partners is crucial, but a mix of senior and upcoming professionals is good for mentorship and capacity development.
- Timely review and feedback is very useful and the setting of realistic targets from the onset is important for success.

7. Challenges

Some main challenges have been encountered in applying the experience:

- Institutional bureaucratic processes which slow down the process of implementation;
- Unequal partnerships, capacities, resources among the partner institutions;
- Balancing project demands and other academic obligations; wherefore it is good to have a full time project staff;

- Volatile environments, as three out of five partner institutions went on strike and closed in course of the project;
- Very low understanding of the social work profession and its role amongst key policy makers and line ministries.

Some challenges have been addressed:

- Ongoing communication to understand the work context and assuring mutual support has helped to spur the project on.
- Exchange visits to strengthen capacity, external facilitators, scientific writing workshops and ongoing sharing of information were helpful as well.
- Inadequate and unequal resource envelopes have been addressed through soliciting for additional funding.
- To address apathy amongst policy makers, efforts have been made to disseminate information and involve them in major project activities and events such as workshops and conferences.

Other challenges remained:

- Policy advocacy for the regulation of the profession is an ongoing and long term process and therefore the momentum needs to be maintained for this to be realized.
- The work overload by involved personnel as well as capacity gaps in research and publications slows down the realization of some results.

8. Sustainability

The capacity building elements of the project contribute directly to the sustainability of benefits. For example increased capacity for training, research and publications will lead to more quality outputs from social work institutions which in turn strengthen the

profession in the region. The actors and local institutions involved in the project will develop more capacity by professional training in the innovative paradigm of social development; this includes NGOs, CBOs, FBOs and professional social work bodies in East Africa. The networks and linkages that have been developed and strengthened are contributing to long-term relationships amongst social development stakeholders which are essential for advancing social development.

9. Experience Sharing/ Up-scaling

The project was presented at the global social work social development conference in Stockholm in 2012 and the Gothenburg University in Sweden in 2012; the ASSWA conference in South Africa in 2013 and during the international conference on Social work in Kampala in march 2014.

For the practice to be replicated, the involved partners must be willing to work together and have a mutual interest in advancing social work. The partners have also to be willing to relate and work as equals.

Also there should be some basic institutional capacity in terms of human resources, space and other facilities that provide a conducive environment for an undivided devotion to the project. And the policy and political environment should be supportive.

This experience can be of interest for social work training institutions and associations in Africa, social development agencies both government agencies as well as NGOs and FBO, social welfare policy makers especially in developing countries and social work fraternity in the rest of the world.

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