



CHECK IT OUT! APASWE

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(Professional) Social Work and Its Functional Alternatives: When
“Social Work” not done by Social Workers

A Contribution to International Social Work Definition Review

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Is the equation, Social Work=Professional Social Work, correct? The question, “What is social work?” is an obsolete question but also a cutting-edge question. On November 5 2012, some 20 APASWE colleagues from eight countries exchanged ideas on the topic, “(Professional) Social Work and Its Functional Alternatives: ‘Social Work’ not by Social Workers”, at JICA Research Institute, Tokyo. The seminar was an interim report meeting of a joint research project which was initiated and financed by Social Work Research Institute Asian Center for Welfare in Society (ACWels), Japan College of Social Work and cosponsored by the APASWE. The aims of the research are: 1) to describe what professional social workers are doing in each country; 2) to observe and record who are doing those same and similar work in communities where there are no or few professional social workers; and 3) to make comparative analysis between them;—all empirically and factually. The results will help understand what social work is, what professional social work is, and what (“ingredients” which used to be in social work) is left behind in professional social work.

Distinction between non-professional Social Work and Professional Social Work

The initial request to project participants was that we distinguish (1) social work and non-social work and (2), “professional” social work and social work, respectively, and see and define social work from “their” side, with eyes of people to be served, not from “our” side, with eyes of (professional) social workers. In his welcome speech, Prof. Tatsuru Akimoto, ACWels Director, said: “There are more than 200 countries and regions on this planet. In overwhelming majority of societies, in the past, present and near future, there are no (or few) professional social workers, while in all societies people have suffered from enormous difficulties and problems in lives. As far as we stick to the equation, Social Work=Professional Social Work, social work cannot serve the overwhelming majority of people in the world and leave them as they are. There are two solutions; one is to produce professional social workers immediately in our countries. It is impossible for us to produce thousands of thousands of professional social workers within a few or even several, years. The other is to import professional social workers from “social work-developed” countries, mainly from Western countries, or from within our region. A shout of “colonialism!” would immediately be heard.”



Don't worry about these solutions. All societies have been responding to those difficulties and problems in their own ways. Otherwise any society could not have sustained itself. We tentatively name them functional alternatives to professional social work. Or we, (professional) social work, may be their functional alternatives.

Traditional Healers, NGOs, Other Professionals, Government officers, Buddhism.....

Interim progress report was prepared by each research sub-team. Lects Leang Lo and Nguon Sophak Kanika from Royal University of Phnom Penh (Cambodia) explained how traditional healers serve as functional alternatives of social workers, and reported progress on the interviews that they made at supermarkets, parks, and taxi stations in order to understand “what is social work(er)” for people in general in the society, Dr. Donald Bruce Yeates from the University of the South Pacific (Fiji and 11 other Pacific island countries) introduced some definitions of social work from the perspectives of professional social workers and NGOs, and identified some social workers without education and degrees. In their 12 countries, “social work” and “social workers” are also named differently in their own language. Dr. Soni Akhmad Nulhaqim (University of Padjadjaran, Indonesia) and Dr. Fentiny Nugroho and Dr. Johanna Debora Imelda (University of Indonesia) reported that there were 4 categories of “social worker”: professional social worker (degree in social work), welfare worker (psychologists, engineers, etc.), social volunteer, as well as traditional leader and healer. They worked together for the benefit of the disadvantaged.

However, in line with law, they have different educational background. Associate Professor Zulkarnain Hatta and PhD Fellow Md. Isahaque Ali (the Universiti Sains Malaysia) introduced a new law called *Social Workers Act* that aims to ensure that all social welfare employees to have social work degrees. He also pointed out the importance and hope of developing mutual working relationships between professional social workers and functional alternative workers for the betterment of the people. From Sri Lanka, Lect. Varathagowry Vasudevan (Sri Lanka School of Social Work) also described professional social work. Chairman, Anuradha Wickramasinghe (Small Fishers Federations), selected Buddhism activities as a functional alternative, and presented a chart comparing it with professional social work. According to the Chairman, in Sri Lanka, Buddhist activities currently seem to have greater influence on people in the society than “professional” social workers’ interventions. Japan College of Social Work Associate Professor Yukio Yamaguchi spoke of his observation of remarkable activities by non-social workers - in contrast to non-functional activities by “professional” social workers in the Northeastern disaster area in Japan. Prof. Decha Sungkawan (Thammasat University, Thailand) and Prof. Emmanuel Luna (University of Philippines) also joined in the discussion.

Associate Professor Zulkarnain Hatta summarized these reports, indicated the future direction of the research to complete the final report. He also emphasized the importance of contribution of our ideas to the present International Definition Review debate. After an enthusiastic long discussion involving participants from the floor, Dr.

Fentiny Nugroho gave the concluding comments, emphasizing the far-reaching effect of this research and its relevance to some perspectives, such as, indigenous social work and spiritual social work.

Diversity of Meanings of “Social Work” and “Professional Social Work” in Each Country

In each country, the language and the meaning of social work are different. Also each participant defines “professionals” differently, based on: 1) whether they received social work education and degree; (2) the level of their skills and knowledge; and (3) whether they are working for money or as occupation.

Cancer Survivors Recruiting Project—A Functional Alternative?

Meeting participants visited the Cancer Solutions Inc., which is legally a corporation but is based on the spirit of social business and promotes non-profit activities in parallel. One of their main activities is the *Cancer Survivors Recruiting Project*, which aims at employment and reemployment of cancer sufferers and survivors. Services include a peer discussion group program, telephone consultation and counseling. Their functions extend to organizer, facilitator, enabler, consultant, counselor, advisor, empowerment, social educator, advocator and social action. “What is different from what we, professional social workers, are doing” was the question directed to the field visitors.

