

Working Relationship between Social Work Practice and Civil Society Activism

Social Work

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Abstract

Social work besides being a discipline characterized with scientific knowledge, skill and attitude is also a profession to be practiced by individuals and organizations of civil society in a country. Theoretically, both social work and civil society are acquaint with tested methods and approaches to undertake a given task of assisting masses to overcome either a social problem or policy matter to be reviewed. In practice, altruism (selflessness) and voluntary association are two basic characteristics that social work and civil society share in common. And since both envision a society with least miseries and human sufferings, therefore both must complement each other's efforts to avoid duplication and wastage of resources while responding to socio-economic and political issues and challenges.

Key words: Social work, theory and practice, Civil society actors, Voluntary association, discipline, benevolence, similarities and differences

Introduction

Social Work besides being a profession is also a logical set of scientific knowledge, skills and attitude to be practiced in broader field of social welfare through its institutions. Social work is also said to be a discipline and helping activity to provide assistance to marginalized segment of population such as the poor, the needy and the socially excluded ones in a given society. This exists to provide individuals with help and backing to help them find social adjustment through certain methods. And the methods being implied are beyond traditional benevolence of rich to poor on faith based ideological ground. Since social work believes on a set of values, therefore, human dignity is not compromised in any case. Its clientele includes needy and deserving individuals singly or in groups both during the peace time or the affected masses of calamities either natural or manmade like drought, flood, war or a biased policy of government or world community. Recently, the International

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Federation of Social Workers IFSW has revitalized the following definition, which tells that “Social work is a practice-based and an academic discipline that promote social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing (IFSW, 2014). Further more, Human societies, where man live in, had never been stagnant altogether. Society besides being a complex web of relationships is changeable, which in turn impacts individuals and their social interactions. Those who cannot keep pace with ever changing nature of society will face multifarious problems ranging from difficulty in adjustment to becoming vulnerable to certain complex problems, which requires professional, knowledge based and sustainable solutions. “Social work seeks to enhance the social functioning of individuals, singularly, and in groups, by activities focused upon their social relationship which contributes interaction between man and his environment. These activities can be grouped into three functions: restoration of impaired capacity, provision of individual and social resources, and prevention of social problems (Boehm, 1975). Both definitions clearly illustrates all aspects of social work both as subject matter and practice to be contributing towards wellbeing of society while helping individuals to get social adjustment.

Civil society

Whereas civil society refer to a situation of goodness in all spheres of human life according to wish and desires of majority masses. Think of what makes a good university. A good university has good teachers, a good curriculum, a good administration, and good building and classrooms. It also has good extracurricular activities including clubs where students can pursue their interests, voice their views and connect with others for achievement of collective goodwill for all. Civil society is similar to those extracurricular activities. A government in a counry is supposed to provide basic necessasities of life such as health, education and security, but can not provide masses with a way to organize themselves to do what is important to them or express their views. Civil society is, indeed, the groups that masses form to advocate and to solve problems that sorround them. “Civil society refers to the arena of uncorked collective action around shared interests, purpose and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state and market, through its practice, the boundaries between state, civil society and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. CSO commonly embrace a diversity of space, actors and institutional forms and are often populated by organizations

such as registered charities, NGOs, professional associations, community groups, women organizations, faith based organizations, trade union, social movements coalitions and advocacy groups (London School of Economic, center for civil society, 2001)

Objectives of the study

- To study the basic concepts and methods of both social work practice and civil society activism
- To find out similarities and differences between social work and civil society
- To suggest pragmatic suggestions for coordination and joint venture for practitioners of social work and civil society

Methodology

Finding out working relationship between both theory and practice of social work and civil society is a time consuming act that requires multi method approach. And since mixed method research was feasible to explore the topic in detail, therefore, primary and secondary data /information was mustered to analyze the topic both quantitative and qualitatively. A large number of books, official reports, research journal and websites were reviewed. Multiple sessions of focus group discussion and personal interviews were also conducted to explore viewpoints of relevant stakeholders like head of Non-Governmental Organizations NGOs, activists of civil society and professional social workers to draw some solid conclusion

Discussion

Both social work and civil society envision a world with least human sufferings, indeed with voluntary association and pragmatic efforts. This mandate helps complement each other's strive in addressing multifarious issues and problem. At the same time it helps explore new avenues of exploration and adding for conceptual clarity. A perfect world where social, economic, political, administrative set up are in place, where rights are fully recognized and taken care of, where there is peace, justice and there is no discrimination seems almost impossible, therefore, social work is the dire need of all the time of today and future generation of entire world. " If the world were a perfect place, it would provide for everyone warm and safe housing, an adequate supply of nutritious food, challenging jobs, good health care, and love and caring from friends and family. It would be a world with minimal stress, crimes and suffering. All people would find their lives satisfying and fulfilling. Social Worker exists because the world is less than perfect. Social Work and social workers serve people and the institutions of society as they confront this

imperfection (Armando Morales, 1986). The rationalization is ample enough for social work profession and its contribution towards betterment of societies and for lessening of miseries of humankind across countries. Since today, in the past and most probably in the future these issues, problems and challenges will be existing, rather might get more diversified, complex and would require humanly responses from societies, therefore, social work would exist, get more organized forms and strategies, techniques, approaches and commitment along with political and financial support from the world community.

Key features of Social Work

There are defined fields of social work practice, which encompass almost every segment of population, age group, gender and socio-economic issues that restrict masses from smooth growth and development as active citizens. They include, but not limited to child, youth and women welfare, people with disabilities, affected masses of both manmade and natural disasters or destitute, deprived, poor, marginalized and socially isolated individuals, groups and communities with preventive, curative and rehabilitative program and activities.

Secondly, Social work is being practiced through well-defined methods, which is further divided into two major categories of primary and secondary. Primary methods deal mostly with individuals and groups for the most part. But it also focuses communities through community organization and community development program. Whereas the secondary method of social work deals with social research, welfare planning and welfare based administration. Social action is another major aspect of secondary method that deals with advocacy related matters over a specific issue, policy matter or operational mechanism.” Social action consists of public and collective efforts by citizen groups to resolve public issues and problems and go effect social institutional reform and social change. Leadership, advocacy, and support activities may aim for the improvement of environmental conditions, for the redistribution of social power and resources, and for changes in the programs. (Siporin, 1975). This secondary method of social work is also performed by and large by actors of civil society, particularly NGOs during agitation campaigning and advocacy related projects.

Thirdly, besides methods, Social work professionals believe in ethical and spiritual equality, freedom of individual development, free choices of opportunities, fair competition, a certain degree of personal independence, freedom of speech and freedom of expression and communication as human values. To institutionalize it, social work practitioners do work through application of various approaches while addressing persons, environment and problems to overcome a particular social adjustment issue or a social problem.

These values and broader objectives of social work were briefly discussed in an article by some Indian writers who argue that “Social work as a profession is a product of this century. Although its roots are well established in history from the time when people 1st began to take responsibility for their neighbors through activities which were called charity, poor relief, philanthropy and social reform. Social work is to fight against Five Evils as: Physical want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness (Satapathy 2009)

Results

As stated earlier that both social work and civil society complements each other’s mandate. Community mobilization and advocacy, for instances, are major ingredients of social work practice, which is the need of all time for civil society to accomplish a specific advocacy campaign. “Civil society cannot exist in vacuum. It requires the mobilization of people based on mutual trust, reciprocity, norms, and ethics so that there may be formed a strong bond among people. Thus social work practice promotes civil society in building strong social capital (Jaysawal, 2013) Complementing each other’s mandate is a good sign for nourishment of both humane responses to ever increasing pace and intensity of socio-economic problems. However there are differences between the both, which must be highlighted.

Let us begin with the positive aspects of similarities to engulf ideological ambiguity about concept and belief of both social workers, activists of civil society organizations, media, the researchers and the masses at large.

Similarities

- Both social work and civil society believe on human values such as human rights, social justice, tolerance, peace and human dignity and decoding these into actions to ensure such an environment that is humane and people friendly through their literatures, materials and immaterial contributions to make it actually happen.
- Civil society organizations and social work professionals are basically action oriented despite of the fact that their areas of influence are limited and confronted with two major powerful forces such as public and private sector as representatives of state and business/ market economy. However it does not mean that both have nothing in terms of theory. Both have intellectual inputs of scholars and practitioners
- Both civil society organizations and professional social workers do extend their help/contribution to individuals, groups and communities that are faced with multifaceted issues of social, economic, political nature, and

over unjust distribution of resources that further widened gaps between various social organizations and among masses

- The rendered services of both social work and civil society cover issues and gaps such as poverty, deprivation, lack accessibility to basic services and biased outcomes of ideological differences among humankind
- Similarities are also found between the two in terms of bringing about changes in to prevailing status of individuals, groups and communities while addressing problems that societies are currently faced with such as promoting and protecting human rights.
- Also common is the challenge of legitimacy and social sanctioning that both social work and civil society are faced with.
- In addition to, both social work and civil society organizations are faced with burden of social problems that prevail in countries of the third world, where neither literature are adequately available, nor political environment is conducive for their interventions.
- Another most prominent feature common among both is the characteristics of having inputs of volunteer associations, provision of public sphere and materializing the notion of good societies.
- Community organization and community development are used as primary method of social work practice, while at the same time specific programs and projects undertaken by NGOs are methods of civil society activism. In social work community organization is undertaken to bring about and maintaining adjustment between social welfare needs and social welfare resources, whereas during the course of action of civil society the notion is considered as substitute of social mobilization and filling gaps in terms of service delivery.
- Social action is one of the secondary methods of social work practice, which is also undertaken to mobilize greater populace to build pressure over policy and decision making mechanism to make them people centered or pro-people through campaign, advocacy and lobbying. Civil society organizations do the same while undertaking social mobilization activities that focuses not only masses, but politicians, media and general masses for bringing about positive changes in current policies, laws and implementation arrangement during most of the right/ advocacy based projects.

- Conducting social research being an integral part of social work education is also used by civil society organizations to unleash root causes of a given social problem, a missing aspect of service delivery mechanism.
- Both social work and civil society are faced with serious weakness of avoiding delicate and sensitive issues to be prevented and cured such as sectarian violence and discrimination, biased treatment of government due to fear of life and livelihood despite of an ever increasing pressure by the masses.

Differences

- Social Work as a profession and course of study is well define and adequately composed, while civil society and its activism is wide spread and yet to be given a comprehensive framework despite of various initiatives taken at international, national and provincial levels.
- Another difference vividly evident between the two is that social work practice encompasses well defined principles, codes of conduct and methods, whereas most of actors of civil society do lack such operating mechanism while intervening into a particular issue or addressing social problems during their course of actions.
- The most prominent feature of difference between professional social work and civil society is that the former does require especial knowledge, skills, and attitudes to practice, while the latter one i.e. civil society can be practiced by any individuals, group, community or foreigners without any particular set of knowledge pertaining to working with people. In most cases of interventions of civil society, realization about issue matters more than having a specific kind of educational background.
- Social work practice do not face issue of legitimacy to the extend both among government and masses for its role and contribution and have adequate social and legal protective shield, while civil society is yet to get social sanctioning and legitimacy both among masses and institutions in most countries of the third world.
- Another difference between the two is that civil society organizations are relatively more independent in matters of strategic planning due to its manageable hierarchal advisory board, while social work profession is faced with bureaucratic and time consuming behavior by the government.

- Social work profession is still confine to welfare based activities for defined target audiences such as disabled, mentally retarded people, juvenile delinquents, deprived children and women etc., while civil society relatively address issues that are considered to be the root causes of many issues that are believed to hamper socio-economic sustainable development, energy crisis and other major regional and international challenges.
- Civil society organizations are independent to explore new opportunities with regard to receive funding in order to timely address issues and challenges, while social work practice is confine to a set of already identified issue to respond.
- Emergence of civil society and its agenda and mandate seems somewhat rootless, superficial and foreign funded and prone to fall down with a little pressure, Social work practice, on the contrary, is sustained to continue despite of its indifference, ineffectiveness and inefficiency as part and parcel of government functionary.

Conclusion and recommendation

While assessing and analyzing social work and civil society along with their similarities and differences it is concluded that a wide gap does prevail between theory and practice of both, which needs to be addressed right away to make both responsive to the needs of the situation and issues and challenges that masses are faced with. Also imperative is to build capacities of both as issues are getting complex as far as their pace, intensity and diversity in increasing due to breakup of society's social values and norms. Also significant is to initiate joint venture and projects to further explore methods and approaches that might need to be updated. It is also advisable to both that by exploring similar features, impact can be augmented and differences will become minimal.

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