

Dear Students of Social Work,

I hope you have learned about our journey towards recognition as a profession in the first letter. One of the challenges for social work students is often how to explain what social work is when the work of volunteers are mistakenly credited as social work. So what is social work and what is volunteerism and how are they different?

Volunteerism is not social work.



So what is it about social work that differentiates it from being a volunteer; what differentiates it from social policy and administration and doing good. The reason why volunteers are mistakenly described as doing social work is because of the seemingly similar tasks that both a social worker and a volunteer do. These include visiting distressed families in their homes, giving practical help and connecting them to help. This is where the similarity ends. For the social worker, these tasks are but one of a whole range of tasks in working with people and communities in a sustained way with a goal that is jointly owned. What distinguishes social workers is their skill in calibrating their facilitation along a continuum of interventions of various degrees of difficulty which a volunteer will not be able to do.



So what is Social Work?

It is the ability to assess the complexity of any case, determine and carry out a course of intervention and engage the client or the community and significant others in a process that places a premium for "client ownership" of the results. In particular, he spends time and effort in engaging people to generate ownership of issues in order to achieve the goal. The goal is to raise the capacity of the individual or community to take charge of his or their own circumstances and garner strengths and resources to make the improvement. Social work is about looking for strengths in people, garnering resources or making systems respond better to the needs of individuals and groups. In instances however where there is neglect, omissions, avoidance and complications in a dysfunction, the social worker's code of conduct requires that he acts to protect the vulnerable in society.

One distinctive art and science in social work is *the use of self in a professional relationship with the client and community* to achieve the goal of using the help. What does this mean? Unlike the doctor that draws on medicine, surgery and implants, the social worker's main tool of intervention is the fostering of a professional relationship that imbues the motivation for change which comes from the person or community being helped. It is a science as it draws on social science theory that says that human behaviours are affected and changed in a more sustained way through relationships and not just by money thrown at a problem. It is also an art as the process of working with others requires the social work activities to be highly adaptable, flexible and personalised. So social workers receive training to apply the science and exercise the art.

Social workers are trained in a body of knowledge, equipped with a set of skills and subscribe to a code of conduct and ethics. This sets the profession apart from a volunteer, another profession and demands a set of commitment and professional code of behaviour.

Another distinction about social work is its ability to operate much like a helicopter with a capability to delve deep to address an issue and individual cases, and yet transcend the individual cases to see trends and patterns to advocate for changes in processes and systems to make them more responsive to those they serve.

Social workers have breadth and depth when working with a community to improve the well being of people. Their collective knowledge, insights and skills always add value to policy formulation in addressing structural and systemic concerns that affect people and provide better policy outcomes.

Trained to work with individuals, with groups and with communities, social workers can work with most situations that require someone to work alongside people who are disadvantaged and people with personal and intense issues that require individuals to make personal choices or changes, or to have systems adapt to them. Social workers are trained to understand what to observe, how to observe and interpret dynamics and communication. They also apply theories of change in working with those affected by the issues to bring about change in thinking, behaviour and aspiration. Equally critical in social work is the ability to know when facilitation takes a back seat and protection and courage must be in the driving seat to safeguard a child abuse victim or self neglect in an old person. In the words of Eileen Munro, a reader in social policy at the London School of Economics, the starting point for any social work such as in child welfare is keen observation and deep understanding that leads through repeated visits, time and thought that a child is frightened of her father or that a mother has psychiatric problems.

Helping others understand



So the next time you have an opportunity to explain the difference between social work and volunteerism, try to help others understand the difference that the training makes. Social work is about gathering insights from deep observations; skilful and purposeful enquiry and designing interventions. It often involves working in difficult situations in getting people and in some instances systems, to see the need for change and to commit to driving them, knowing the support that they will get. Let others know that the theories that social workers draw on underpin the interventions that they make in casework, group work and community development work. Most of all, share how we are guided by a Code of Practice to ensure safe practice and to safeguard the professional relationship we have with those whom we work with.

You will find that as you engage more of your friends and others in discussing about the difference in the work we do as social workers, you will help others better understand the profession.