

Dear Social Service Practitioners,

A common question that arises among practitioners in the social service sector is the relationship between social work, social policy and social change. Many in the sector are in it because they want to see change, and by that, they mean improving lives. However, to create real change, social service practitioners, social workers, social researchers, and others advocating for marginalized individuals and groups must understand the relationship between policy and practice.

In the case of social work, policy practice is often defined as using the skills learnt in social work to propose and change policies in order to better achieve the goal of social and economic justice.

Contribution of Social Work in Social Policy and Social Change



What we learn from practice can play a significant role in influencing policy. What we learn in terms of the definition or framing of problems and in terms of evidence and research, should influence the development of policy. Policies that are informed by practice can better solve problems, meet needs, and improve the well-being of people and communities. At the same time, the role of policy is to create environments where practitioners can conduct their practice. This is best done in an enabling environment that respects their competencies, capabilities and choices. This will enable practitioners to have the flexibility and freedom, within the context of the set social goals and objectives, to do their work well. Practitioners at the ground, at the organisational and at the policy levels can all contribute to policy development. This is because, as practitioners from various fields, they bring experiences and strategies to promote social change interventions.



Micro Practice can Inform Policy

Many social workers and social service staff begin their careers with a passion to help individuals and families. Social workers, in particular, have learnt how to engage clients in the helping process through doing comprehensive assessments, developing intervention plans, and monitoring their implementation. Even though part of the intervention may involve linking families and individuals with community resources to meet identified needs, many social workers focus on micro practice - helping specific people in need. When social workers monitor family progress, they are often able to see specific improvements in the family's situation as a result of their planned interventions. However, there are times when progress is not so easily achieved.

Using the systems theory to analyse family circumstances, social workers can determine the factors that create barriers to change. Sometimes, these barriers are internal, such as having low motivation or limited ability to carry out basic functional tasks. At other times, these barriers are external such as barriers in the community, societal perceptions, or the lack of measures to protect the interests of individuals.

When social workers encounter difficulties in linking people to community resources, or in making sure that the services are adequate to address the need, they are confronted with the need for policy practice, and for making changes in the community and social systems. In such circumstances, services may need to be expanded or created. Every now and then, emerging trends, demographic changes, and changes in family structures can also create challenges for carers. As such, better social protection measures may need to be considered.

Sometimes, macro-practice changes will require great effort and time before changes can take hold. This is because the targets of change may include several environmental components – such as new laws, changes in agency policies, or additional resources. In general, a long-term solution usually takes time, and may not offer much hope for immediate relief. At times, a law may be introduced as in the case of the Vulnerable Persons Bill to prepare for emerging and future conditions.

Lessons in Policy Making



What then are some of the lessons that practitioners have garnered over the decades in shaping policy deliberations and outcomes?

Lesson 1: Being clear about purpose. It is always useful to be clear about why we do what we do, and to do things right. We have to be able to have the vision that is anchored in what children, young people, families, older persons, and those with disabilities need in order for us to move the agenda and to improve lives.

Lesson 2: Being results focused. Being results focused involves having strong analytical, problem solving, communication and social skills. These have to be coupled with empathy. Leaders who are skilful in bringing about change are able to diagnose and address interpersonal problems, both at the workplace and when working across structures and systems. A good leader would seek to strengthen both of these. Being results focused and socially skilled requires a constant balancing effort. Enabling professionals to devote time on clinical practice and service will translate to better service to clients.

Lesson 3: Translating evidence into policy. It is useful to draw findings from research, and apply it to shape the content and curriculum of programmes, services, and models in order to bring about positive changes. By being deliberate in shifting towards recognising outcomes that are linked to research findings, we can shape interventions which in turn shape the behaviour and wellbeing of clients. This requires consistency in implementation and a refreshed evaluation of programmes and services that draw on what works in practice within resource constraints.

Lesson 4: Continuously monitoring for innovations. We need to know what goes on in communities – what is current, what is new, and how those things are being documented and evaluated. That is part of our practitioners' expertise. The challenge posed to social service sector leaders is usually that of innovation and scaling, and the time appropriateness of doing so when the evidence of impact is clear. This is to ensure that what is to be scaled has evidential impact on end clients and is not used for promotional reasons.

Lesson 5: Participation of users and clients in the policy making process. Current policy making is largely driven by legislators, experts and professionals, including a few practitioners acting as intermediaries. We need to have constant consultations with users and clients and to help them articulate their experiences as clearly as possible. This will help policy makers to have a better understanding of their experiences and how the policies may affect them. When we are trying to relay the importance of an issue to people who have no experience with it, we have to find authentic ways to make that happen. We should be working to ensure that our families are heard, and that they are participating in a timely manner in the collection of data around their experiences. This helps to ensure that there is an authentic client voice in the process of policy making and evaluation. In addition, designing participation does require thoughtful planning and implementing. (For more insights into this topic, please see earlier letter on “Designing Participation” found here: <http://tinyurl.com/designingparticipation>)

Lesson 6: Systems perspective in understanding issues. In working with individuals, social workers use the systems perspective to understand how all the various elements in the environment interact with one another to facilitate or hinder the individual’s ability to develop to his or her potential. The ability to conceptualize societal issues and challenges from a systems perspective helps to provide insights into everyone’s stake in creating solutions. The systems perspective helps social workers and policy makers understand social problems not as isolated issues, but within a constantly interactive environment of problems, solutions, and other factors.

Social Change



In the pursuit of social change, it is essential for social workers to understand how micro practice sits within the context of the policies in place, and the influence and impact they have on each other. With this in mind, social workers can then better work in both the micro and macro settings to create an environment that allows the lives of the vulnerable who are seeking change to flourish.

15 July 2016
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