



SOCIAL WORK

Perspectives on
Practice and Extension.

Ilango Ponnuswami
Abraham P. Francis

Professional Social Work

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Edited by

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Introduction: Professional Social Work— Practice and Extension

—Ilango Ponnuswami and Abraham P. Francis

One of the serious limitations of professional social work activity in India is the huge gap between social work curriculum and practice / extension. In fact, these two activities are going on side by side in a parallel manner with hardly any meeting point. Generally, most social work educators confine themselves to only teaching and research with very little or almost no involvement in practice or extension activities. On the other hand, by and large, social work practitioners restrict themselves to field practice and seldom get involved in social work teaching. There are so many official and administrative barriers that prevent the frequent coming together of social work educators and practitioners to share their knowledge and experiences for mutual learning. Due to this, both the parties are indulging in a 'blame game' accusing each other of being obsolete and irrelevant.

SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

There is absolutely no recognition for private practice by social workers in India, unlike some of the more advanced countries. Almost all professional social workers employed in social welfare agencies and other institutions practice social work methods within the confines of the agencies. Much of what they do depends on the policies and priorities of the agencies. Even in settings where social workers are part of a professional team,

they do not get the due recognition and seldom get involved in crucial decision making. Due to various reasons, still, social workers are looked at as mere providers of simple services and not as professional interventionists.

SOCIAL WORK EXTENSION

Extension is a very important activity which contributes to the enhancement of the status and public recognition of a profession and welfare of the society at large. While medicine, nursing and agriculture are recognized as professions in India, even after existing for more than 75 years, social work has still not gained recognition as a profession in the country mainly because institutions offering social work education have not taken this important 'third pillar' of higher education quite seriously and social work educators all over the nation have predominantly restricted themselves to 'teaching' and 'research' activities and neglected the vital aspect of 'extension'. In fact, it is extension which makes a profession 'visible' and 'acceptable' to the masses. Probably, the reason for this could be the lack of clarity concerning the concept and role of extension in higher education, particularly with reference to social work. Hence, an attempt is made in this chapter, to present the basic essentials of extension concept and their relevance to social work.

EXTENSION—CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

The term extension was first used to describe adult education programmes in England in the second half of the 19th century; these programmes helped to expand - or extend - the work of universities beyond the campus and into the neighbouring community. The term was later adopted in the United States of America, while in Britain it was replaced with "advisory service" in the 20th century. A number of other terms are used in different parts of the world to describe the same or a similar concept:

Arabic: *Al-Ershad* ("Guidance")

Dutch: *Voorlichting* ("lighting the path")

German: *Beratung* (“advisory work”)

French: *Vulgarisation* (“popularisation”)

Spanish: *Capacitación* (“Training” “Capacity Building”)

Thai, Lao: *Song-Suem* (“to promote”)

Persian: *Tarvij & Gostaresh* (“to promote and to extend”)

In the US, an extension agent is a university employee who develops and delivers educational programmes to assist people in economic and community development, leadership, family issues, agriculture and environment (Wikipedia).

DEFINITIONS OF EXTENSION

There is no widely accepted definition of agricultural extension. The following essential characteristic features and functions of agricultural extension are taken from a number of books on extension published over a period of more than 50 years:

- The central task of extension is to help rural families help themselves by *applying science, whether physical or social, to the daily routines of farming, homemaking, and family and community living.*
- Agricultural extension has been described as a *system of out-of-school education for rural people.*
- Extension personnel have the task of bringing scientific knowledge to farm families in the farms and homes. The object of the task is to *improve the efficiency of agriculture.*
- Extension is a service or system which assists farm people, through educational procedures, in improving farming methods and techniques, increasing production efficiency and income, *bettering their levels of living and lifting social and educational standards.*
- Extension involves the *conscious use of communication of information to help people form sound opinions and make good decisions.*
- Agricultural Extension is Assistance to farmers to help them identify and analyse their production problems and become aware of the opportunities for improvement.

- *Extension is a professional communication intervention deployed by an institution to induce change in voluntary behaviours with a presumed public or collective utility.*
- *Extension [is] the organized exchange of information and the purposive transfer of skills.*
- The essence of agricultural extension is to facilitate interplay and nurture synergies within a total information system involving agricultural research, agricultural education and a vast complex of information-providing businesses.
- *Extension [is] a series of embedded communicative interventions that are meant, among others, to develop and/or induce innovations which supposedly help to resolve (usually multi-actor) problematic situations. (Wikipedia).*

SOCIAL WORK AND EXTENSION

The link between professional social work and extension is as important as the link between agriculture and extension. Unfortunately, even though social workers have been engaging themselves in various community-based welfare activities and projects either as part of the field work curriculum or as outreach activities of the social work schools and departments, somehow, there is a lack of emphasis on this vital aspect of extension and there are umpteen number of reasons for this serious lacuna. Some important reasons are; lack of funding for extension activities, concentration of social work schools in urban centers far away from the rural areas, lack of proper recognition and due weightage for the academic requirements or for career advancement, the tendency to confine social work interventions to the safe confines of agencies, so on and so forth. To my mind, all the essential characteristics of extension work (italicized in the preceding paragraphs) can be applied to professional social work as well, may be some with little modifications and adaptations. The following is an attempt to define social work extension incorporating all the above features of agricultural extension:

Social work extension aims at applying science, whether physical or social, to the daily routines of farming, homemaking, and family and community living. It is also a system of out-of-school education for rural and other marginalized people. It leads to improvement in the efficiency of agriculture and other livelihood strategies. One of its main objectives is bettering the levels of living of people and lifting social and educational standards. It also ensures conscious use of communication of information to help people form sound opinions and make good decisions. Besides, social work extension is also a professional communication intervention deployed by an institution to induce change in voluntary behaviours with a presumed public or collective utility, organized exchange of information and the purposive transfer of skills with the ultimate goal of developing and/or inducing innovations which supposedly help to resolve (usually multi-actor) problematic situations.

FOUR PARADIGMS OF AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION

Any particular extension system can be described both in terms of both how communication takes place and why it takes place. It is not the case that paternalistic systems are always persuasive, nor is it the case that participatory projects are necessarily educational. Instead there are four possible combinations, each of which represents a different extension paradigm, as follows:

- *Technology transfer (persuasive + paternalistic)*. This paradigm was prevalent in colonial times, and reappeared in the 1970s and 1980s when the Training and Visit system was established across Asia. Technology transfer involves a top-down approach that delivers specific recommendations to farmers about the practices they should adopt.
- *Advisory work (persuasive + participatory)*. This paradigm can be seen today where government organisations or private consulting companies respond to farmers' enquiries with technical prescriptions. It also takes the form of projects managed by donor agencies and NGOs that use participatory approaches to promote pre-determined packages of technology.

- *Human Resource Development (educational + paternalistic)*. This paradigm dominated the earliest days of extension in Europe and North America, when universities gave training to rural people who were too poor to attend full-time courses. It continues today in the outreach activities of colleges around the world. Top-down teaching methods are employed, but students are expected to make their own decisions about how to use the knowledge they acquire.
- *Facilitation for empowerment (educational + participatory)*. This paradigm involves methods such as experiential learning and farmer-to-farmer exchanges. Knowledge is gained through interactive processes and the participants are encouraged to make their own decisions. The best known examples in Asia are projects that use Farmer Field Schools (FFS) or participatory technology development (PTD).

It must be noted that there is some disagreement about whether or not the concept and name of extension really encompasses all four paradigms. Some experts believe that the term should be restricted to persuasive approaches, while others believe it should only be used for educational activities. From a practical point of view, however, communication processes that conform to each of these four paradigms are currently being organized under the name of extension in one part of the world or another. Pragmatically, if not ideologically, all of these activities are agricultural extension.

APPLICABILITY TO SOCIAL WORK

All the four paradigms of agricultural extension seem to be relevant, some to a greater extent and some to a lesser extent, to the extension work that can be carried out by professional social workers. As far as the Technology Transfer paradigm is concerned, social workers can certainly transfer their knowledge of scientific methods and techniques of handling psycho-social problems, environmental problems, community conflicts etc., to the people. From the Advisory Work perspective, social workers can provide the much needed wise

counsel to the people at individual, group and community levels to effectively handle problems and seek solutions for felt needs. Probably, the most suitable model for social work extension would be the Human Resource Development Model whereby social work schools / departments carry out outreach activities for the benefit of poor and needy rural communities offering sensitization and training programmes which have practical utilitarian value. Even the paradigm of facilitation for empowerment is quite relevant to social work since it is possible to offer social work interventions which provide experiential learning to different categories of clientele in different settings.

DIFFERENT EXTENSION METHODS: MASS, GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL

Individual Methods of Extension

Individual or face-to-face methods are probably the most universally used extension methods in both developed and developing countries. In the field of agriculture, the extension agent meets the farmer at home or on the farm and discusses issues of mutual interest, giving the farmer both information and advice. The atmosphere of the meeting is usually informal and relaxed, and the farmer is able to benefit from the agent's individual attention. Individual meetings are probably the most important aspect of all extension work and invaluable for building confidence between the agent and the farmer. Learning is very much an individual process and, although group methods enable the agent to reach a greater number of farmers, personal contact with and the individual attention of the extension agent are important supports for a farmer. The personal influence of the extension worker can be a critical factor in helping a farmer through difficult decisions, and can also be instrumental in getting the farmer to participate in extension activities. A farmer is often likely to listen to the advice given by the extension agent and will be grateful for this individual attention. All these points are relevant even for social work extension. Unlike the West, in India, still social work professionals have not been documenting the process and outcome of individual social work interventions with high levels

of professionalism, thereby creating a vacuum of 'evidence-base' for social work with individuals in different settings.

Group Methods of Extension

The use of groups in extension has become more common over the past decade, and indeed a number of new ideas have emerged about how groups may be used most effectively. For example, the widespread Small Farmer Development Programme (SFDP) in Southeast Asia was based upon group methods and it has produced two manuals which detail the approach of group extension work. Furthermore, in Latin America, work with extension groups in Brazil and Colombia has shown the usefulness to extension of the formation of extension groups, and how these groups can support extension activity. It has been seen that individual extension methods can be costly in both terms of time and scarce extension resources, and that they reach only a limited number of people. There is also the danger that too much emphasis upon individuals can lead to undue concentration on progressive farmers to the detriment of the poorer farmers.

The group method offers the possibility of greater extension coverage, and is therefore more cost-effective. Using the group method, the extension worker can reach more farmers and in this way make contact with many more farmers who have had no previous contact with extension activities. Extension groups offer a more reflective learning environment in which the farmer can listen, discuss and decide upon his involvement in the extension activity. The support of the group helps an individual farmer to make decisions and determine a course of action. The group creates a supportive atmosphere, and individual farmers can gain greater self-confidence by joining others to discuss new ideas and try out new practices.

The group method brings together farmers with similar problems. Often, these problems demand concerted action (tackling the erosion of a hillside, for example), and such action can be taken more effectively by a group rather than by an individual, who may be overwhelmed by the enormity of certain problems. Before considering in detail a number of different

group methods of extension, it is necessary to look at some of the more important issues concerning the extension group. To form, structure and develop a group of farmers for extension purposes is a complex process, and such groups do not appear overnight. It is not sufficient for the extension agent merely to bring the farmers together for a particular activity. He must give time and thought to the fact that the farmers will constitute a group, will function as a group and will display characteristics associated with groups. Experience in different parts of the world has shown that there are four sets of important issues that the agent will have to bear in mind:

Purpose

The agent should be aware of two main purposes in his work with groups. First, he should try to develop the group, to encourage its members to continue to meet and to establish the group on a permanent basis. In this way, the agent will be developing a base from which group members can continue their development efforts. Second, the agent should use the group to transmit new ideas, information and knowledge that will assist the farmers in their agricultural activities. While the second use of groups is more common, it is important that the agent consider the initial development of the group as an equally vital extension activity.

Size

The most suitable size for groups in rural extension is between 20 and 40 members. If the group is too large, it becomes unwieldy and many farmers may feel lost and bewildered. Smaller groups allow closer contact, a better chance of involvement and more opportunity for strengthening bonds of friendship and support among members. One common determinant of group size is geographical location: its membership will be restricted to those living within a particular area.

Membership

Since the extension agent's job is to help farmers identify and

tackle problems, it is better to have groups of farmers with common problems. If the agent is working with a group made up of different types of farmers, ranging, for example, from big landowners to small, tenant farmers, it may be difficult for him to achieve a common purpose within the group. The agent, therefore, should pay careful attention to group membership and try to ensure that its members share a common interest and problems.

Extension Worker's Relationship with Group

The extension worker should give considerable thought to his relationship with the group. Ideally, he will want to encourage the group's formation and help to strengthen it. If his extension work takes him to another area, it is hoped that he will leave behind a structure that can function with a minimum of extension support. The agent should try to avoid being directly responsible for setting up the groups and should try to ensure that they are based, where possible, upon existing social or cultural community groups. In all of his activities with groups, the agent should beware of the group becoming too dependent upon him and of creating a structure that needs him for survival. Instead, the agent should strive to encourage an element of independence in the group, by encouraging the group to take the initiative in extension activities and to decide for itself in what way the agent can be of assistance.

These four issues, then, should be borne in mind by the agent as he pursues his work with extension groups. His main concern will be to do his work well and to ensure that, through the group approach, more farmers come into contact with new ideas and practices. In the long run, group work might be even more productive and effective if he gave some thought to the development of the group itself in his extension work (Wikipedia).

FURTHER THOUGHTS ON SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND EXTENSION

It is high time the professional social work community in India wakes up to the crucial and inevitable reality of having to prove

its *raison d'être* for having existed and still desiring to not only exist but also grow as a profession in the country. If at all the so called but still not publicly recognized 'profession' has achieved something just by surviving all the social realities and competing forces from different quarters, I would say that it was all possible because of the little contributions here and there by some dedicated social workers. On the other hand, for all the problems, challenges and lack of recognition and a credible public image faced by the social work profession at the moment in the country, I will put the blame squarely on one disastrous failure on the part of all those involved to establish and maintain a parallel practice-base and strong evidence of extension activities. Like the adage in academic circles 'Publish or Perish', I would suggest 'Extend or Expire' for social work profession. I sincerely hope and trust that at least this rude shock and realization of the impending danger will shake the professional social workers and push them forward to take necessary steps in the right direction.

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Web Resources

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agricultural_extension

<http://www.ifsw.org/en/p38000208.html>

<http://www.ifsw.org/en/p38000208.html>