

FLEDGLING PROFESSION

How do you establish social work in one of the poorest countries in the world? **Nigel Hall**, Human Rights Commissioner for the International Federation of Social Workers, looks at a UK project helping to do just that in Malawi – and urges other BASW members to get involved



The need

Social workers in the UK might wonder what contribution they can make to another country. Well how about Malawi, an English-speaking former colonial territory in southern Africa where social work is in its infancy? Ranked one of the world's poorest countries, 90 per cent of its 17 million population live below the poverty income threshold. Only nine per cent have access to grid electricity and life expectancy is just 55 years.

Malawi faces a myriad of social problems including a high HIV prevalence rate, child abuse, matrimonial breakdown, gender-based inequality and violence, poverty, prostitution and the unmet needs of vulnerable and disabled adults that continue to have devastating effects on many.

Traditionally the extended family was the main source of support but this is breaking down, partly due to some of the problems already mentioned. Social work can mitigate such problems by helping people and communities develop strategies to deal with difficult socio-economic and psychosocial problems.

Developing social work expertise

As in other sub-Saharan African countries, social work in Malawi is relatively young, with a shortage of front line social workers, particularly at the district level. Social work in this context has a strong focus on community and social development because practitioners need to reinforce initiatives to strengthen and enable people to develop self-reliance.

A crucial requirement of establishing social work as a profession in another country is the development of the profession's educational base. A UK-based project called Supporting

Social Work in Malawi (SSWIM) is doing just that with a degree course for social work at Chancellors College, University of Malawi in Zomba (known as Chanco). SSWIM is run by the Children and Families International Foundation (CFIF), a charity that aims to promote and safeguard the welfare of orphans and vulnerable children.

Having run smaller projects in Malawi, the charity has adopted a more strategic approach aimed at building a workforce with direct responsibility for child welfare and the protection of other vulnerable groups.

Professional education

Through SSWIM, the charity has helped develop an academic programme in social work and is now focused on the practice training side of the curriculum. This includes establishing a core group of practice educators. In the longer term, the aim is to establish a network of practice educators across the country to promote and sustain practice education that, in turn, will contribute to the development of social work education.

Creating a social work profession in another country doesn't happen overnight. For the last four years, SSWIM members from the UK have been travelling to Malawi with the goal of establishing professional education.

As well as helping to design the social work degree, linked to international curriculum standards, we have delivered teaching to staff and students, provided textbooks, helped identify workplace practice placements, assisted in drawing up guidelines and protocols for students on placements and delivered training for placement supervisors.

Creating a national association

Alongside UNICEF, SSWIM is also working with social workers in Malawi to help build a national association for the profession. A taskforce has been set up to work on this with support from the International Federation of Social Workers, which has links with 23 member countries in Africa, including some of Malawi's neighbours.

Assistance from BASW members, especially those with experience working in this part of the world, would be appreciated.

Future plans

Developing a sustainable social work profession in Malawi requires continuing mentoring work by people who are sensitive to the African context. Among plans for the future is creating a long-term volunteer programme providing teaching and placement opportunities to social workers in the UK and beyond to work in Malawi.

If anyone is interested in taking part in this please get in touch (contact details below).

Through SSWIM, university staff in the UK are also involved in establishing a joint research programme with Chanco to develop the research capacity of the social work profession and provide data about social issues in Malawi.

Though the road ahead may be long, it's an inspiring journey to be on.

● For more information see: www.childrenandfamiliesinternationalfoundation.org.uk

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