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Understanding the Efficacy of Bhutan's First Ever Certificate Course in Social Work

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Abstract

With the transition of political, economic and social scenario in Bhutan, the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have been expanding over the years. Bhutan has more than forty registered CSOs and the numbers are still growing. However, paucity of trained social workers in Bhutan has compelled the CSOs to recruit employees with varying degrees. To mitigate this, Samtse College of Education (SCE) of the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) launched Bhutan's first ever certificate course in social work. So far, two cohorts of participants have been trained. This study was designed to understand the efficacy of Bhutan's first ever certificate course in social work from the vantage point of the participants. It adopted a convergent parallel mixed method design, primarily employing questionnaires and semi-structured individual interviews. The study found the certificate course to be highly effective in enhancing the professional competence of the social workers in Bhutan. It is believed to have been an "eye-opening experience" for most social workers who ventured into this profession, without relevant training. The study recommends SCE and RUB to provide similar certificate courses to the thousands of untrained social workers in Bhutan.

Keywords: social workers, civil society organisation, certificate course

Introduction

Social work is often defined as a profession aimed at alleviating the conditions of those people in a community suffering from social deprivation and helping them to meet basic and complex needs. According to United States' National Association of Social Workers [NASW] (2016), the role of the social workers is to assist other individuals, families, and groups to restore or enhance their capacity for social functioning, and work to create societal conditions that support communities in need.

The social work as a profession in United States was established in the late 19th century to ensure that immigrants and other vulnerable people gained tools and skills to escape economic and social poverty. Since the first social work class that was offered in the summer of 1898 at Columbia University, social workers in United States continue to address the needs of society and bring their nation's social problems to the public's attention. Similarly, the social work profession in our neighbouring country, India made a humble beginning in 1936 with the establishment of Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work in Bombay. Since then there has been a continuous trend in the development of the social work profession, professional training is being increasingly recognised by Government and private organisations.

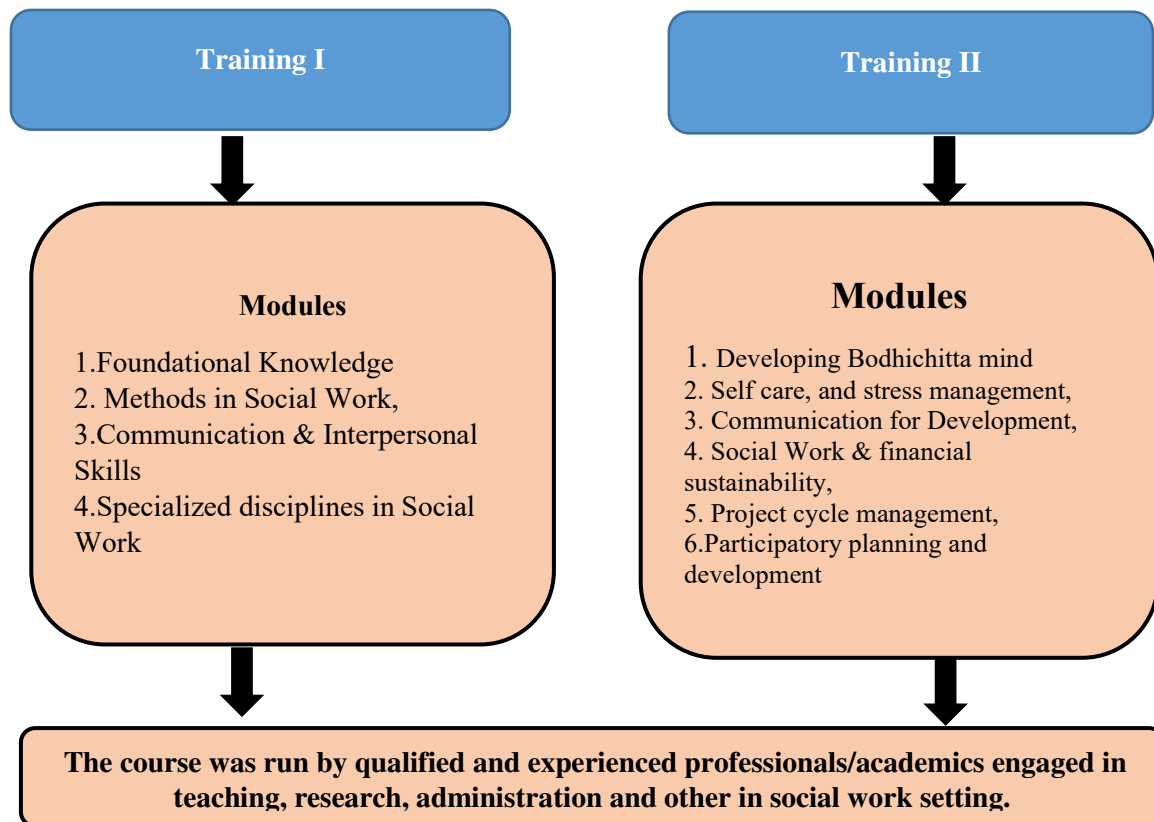
Bhutan is not far behind in promoting this helping profession. Ever since the formation of Bhutan as a nation state, Bhutanese have always nurtured a sense of community association and lived in harmony helping each other in times of need. Service for others is one of Bhutanese society's most profound intangible cultures that influences social relationships, the values of help and reciprocity, community vitality, sustainable wellbeing and happiness. Existence of such timeless practice confirms that civil society in Bhutan is not a recent phenomenon. In his article on "Emergence of Civil Society in Bhutan", Dorji (2017) states that civil society had been existing in Bhutan long before we knew what civil society actually meant although the concept of formalized civil society emerged sometime in the late 1980s. An imperative need was felt to formalise such social service groups who could complement the government development policies and programme and consequently the national parliament passed the Civil Society Act in 2007 which was operationalized in 2010 (Asian Development Bank, 2013). With the enactment of CSO Act 2007, which was revised in 2017, as many as 49 CSOs have registered till now and majority of them are public benefit organizations (PBOs) known for working with vulnerable groups of society. Thus the evolving civil society organization are perceived as an extension of traditional associations (Galay, 2001).

Currently there are 49 registered CSOs, 39 Public Benefit Organizations (PBOs) and 10 Mutual Benefit Organizations (MBOs). However, there is also a general concern as to whether all the CSOs sector truly represent the real needs and aspiration of the general public. A study by Choiden & Peljor (2017) reveals that not many people are aware of the existence of CSOs in Bhutan. Apparently most social workers in Bhutan work with the registered CSOs. Some of them have been working with varied CSOs for more than a decade, without professional trainings and academic preparation. Choden (2018) observes that most social workers in Bhutan had different educational background mismatching the current field requirement. Onyiko et al (2017) contends that if the social workers are made professionally ready then there won't be "gaps in the social development" of the nation (p. 86). The need for knowledge, skills and abilities in Bhutan has become imperative for a social worker to perform professionally and effectively.

Therefore, the introduction of the certificate course in social work was intended to provide participants with knowledge, skills and insights required to be efficient social work professionals. Anchored on the SCE's philosophical vision of right view, right contemplation or understanding and right action leading to right fruition, the Certificate Course in Social Work aimed to prepare the social work professionals whose knowledge, skills and values would be guided by the wisdom of the act of beneficence and generosity. Guided by this timeless wisdom of helping others, volunteerism has always been at the heart of Bhutanese cultural ethos and everyday life, especially in the villages. It was offered with technical support from the UNICEF and so far two cohorts comprising of 45 participants from different Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), government offices and educators received the training. The training was provided in two phases (Training I and Training II) with each phase running five days. In between the two trainings, a period of six months, the participants were also assigned with small projects to bring about a social change in their work settings. The first phase of the training began in January 2018.

Training I entailed contents drawn from four broad areas of social work education such as foundational knowledge, methods in social work, communication and interpersonal skills for social work, and specialised disciplines regarding social work. Training II included sessions on developing Bodichitta mind, self-care and stress management in social work, communication for development, social work and financial sustainability, project cycle management and participatory planning and development. Therefore, the study was conducted to review the relevance and usefulness of the course. The perceptions of the participants on the efficacy of the course to social work practitioners was sought to validate the relevance and usefulness of the course.

Figure 1: SCE Approach



A mixed mode of research methodology employing questionnaires and interviews was employed. It was gathered through a sample of 30 participants from the first two cohorts. The quantitative data was assembled through administering questionnaire to the participant. To administer the interview, the researcher adopted a semi-structured interview design because it offered a structured flexibility.

The data analysis of the questionnaire was done by tabulating standard deviation and mean from all the items in the questionnaire. The data assembled through the interview was analysed using thematic analysis.

The key findings to the study revealed that Bhutan's first two certificate courses in social was very effective in enhancing the professional competence of the participants. Most participants considered the certificate training as an "eye-opening experience" with many suggesting that SCE should continue offering this forms of training, down the line. The other recommendations include a need to introduce Professional Development (PD) programmes for social work practitioners in Bhutan, introduction of courses like diploma, degree and masters to upgrade the qualification and professional competency of social workers in Bhutan.

Literature Review

Evolution of CSOs in Bhutan

The principles of civil society and Buddhism are closely related to each other. Buddhism breathes in Bhutanese culture, customs, history and landscape (Dorji, 2017). The civil society in Bhutan existed long before we knew what civil society actually meant although the concept of formalized civil society emerged only in the late 1980s (Dorji, 2017). According to Chuki (2017), traditional agrarian Bhutanese society relied on locally available self-help mechanisms to address various societal challenges as there were none of the registered civil society organisations (CSOs) which exist today.

People relied on naturally formed systems that were based on local needs at the grassroots level in the rural villages in a traditional society.

Social work has always been a part of Bhutanese culture. When someone passes away in the family, everyone in the neighbourhood gathered bringing food supplies, kitchen utensils and beddings enough for twenty one days. The neighbours performed the household chores, the monks performed the rituals and elderlies consoled the family in grief. Similarly, when someone in the village built a house, everyone gathered for support (Pek-Dorji, 2017) without expecting anything in return. *Tshogpas* (groups), formed for multiple purposes, had benefited almost all the citizens at varied points of time. But most of these *Tshogpas* were not formalized and essentially belonged to the era of De-facto Civil Society in which “isolated rural communities evolved and practiced self-help mechanism to cater to individual and community needs for economic and spiritual well-being” (Dorji, 2017, para. 3). In a way, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Bhutan have existed for many years in the form of community association and organizations which formed an integral part of the traditional Bhutanese society.

Role of CSOs

CSOs are considered as an important player in filling the gray areas or to be responsive to the real world (Smismans, 2008). According to European Commission (2011), CSO are looked upon favorably by both policy makers and individuals. In Bhutan, CSOs play a major role in service delivery, advocacy and community building. The role of CSOs in Bhutan is clearly defined by the Civil Society Organizations Act of Bhutan 2007 (CSOA) which states that CSO shall be associations, societies, foundations, charitable trust, not-for-profit organizations and shall not distribute any income or profit to their members, founders, donors, directors or trustees. Furthermore, CSOs do not include trade unions, political parties, cooperatives or religious organizations which are devoted primarily to religious worship.

The government recognize them as potential partners in planning and implementation of development plans. Efforts to include CSOs in formulation of five year plan is evidenced by their involvement in the drafting of 11th and 12th Five Year plans. Their role as collaborative partners in plan implementation and ‘filling up the gaps’ in areas that government organizations are unable to reach is growing over the years. To further strengthen their capacity and enhance their visibility, the European Union had funded 53 CSOs, both formal and informal through EU’s multi-indicative programme (MIP) 2014 - 2020.

Need for Professional Competence in Social Work

It is of overriding importance for CSOs to either recruit trained social workers or to provide necessary training to them. “Education and training is important because it is the preparatory phase for social work practice” Onyiko, Nzau and Ngendo (2017, p. 86) in order to develop personal potential and stimulate professionally important abilities (Minzhanov, Ertysbaeva, Abdakimova, Pirmagambet & Ishanov, 2016). Social workers need to be competent. They need to be prepared for varied challenges which they ought to face, ultimately. Onyiko et al (2017) contend that if the social workers are made professionally ready then there won’t be “gaps in the social development” of the nation (p. 86). A single professionally competent social worker possesses the potential to bring about countless positive changes in the society.

Many of the Bhutanese social worker have been working with varied CSOs for more than a decade, without professional trainings and academic preparation. Choden (2018) observes that most social workers in Bhutan had different educational background mismatching the current field requirement. She contends that most social workers receive an on the job training experience, which of course plays a predominant role in advocating positive social changes. However, pursuing a social work career without any professional training and experience entail several risk. For example, paucity of legal knowledge has been a major stumbling block for most social workers in Bhutan.

Methodology

Paradigm and research design

The study was grounded on pragmatism as the research paradigm since its aim was to assess participants' perceptions on the efficacy of Certificate Course in Social Work Training offered by SCE. Informed by pragmatism, a convergent parallel mixed methods research design was seen as an appropriate design that helped to guide this study. According to Creswell (2014), a convergent parallel mixed methods design will involve simultaneously collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, merging the data and using the result to understand the problem investigated.

Data collection procedures and sample size

Quantitative data on participants' perceptions on the efficacy of Certificate Course in Social Work Training offered by SCE was collected using a survey questionnaire. The survey questionnaire consisting of three sections – demographic profile of participants, general perceptions of the participants on the training, and participants' satisfaction with the course content and activities. The Participants' perceptions was measured using statements on a five-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree) and (1 =Least Satisfaction, 2 = Low Satisfaction, 3 = Moderate Satisfaction, 4 = Satisfied, and 5 = Highly Satisfied) respectively. A total of 30 participants had taken part in the survey, proportionately drawn from relevant sectors and agencies. To administer the interview, a semi-structured interview design was adopted as it offers a structured flexibility. The semi-structured interview design was employed while conducting individual interview with the participants. Of the 30 participants, 19 (63.3 %) were male and 11 (36. %) were female as shown in table 1.

Table1: Demographic characteristic of the participants

	Frequency	percent
Male	19	63.3
Female	11	36.7
Total	30	100.0

To administer the interview, the researcher adopted a semi-structured interview design as it offers a structured flexibility.

Data Analysis Procedures

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Ver.21 was used to analysis the descriptive statistics results besides Microsoft Excel version 2013 to generate results in the form of graphs and tables. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, mean, standard deviation and indices was used to describe and summarize the demographic information, general perceptions of the participants on the training, and participants' satisfaction with the course content and activities. The data assembled through the interview was analysed using thematic analysis.

The learning achievement index had a Cronbach alpha of 0.846. The content of Training I and Training II was developed to find out the effectiveness of the training. The Cronbach alpha for the content of Training I was 0.907 and Training II was 0.888.

Table 2: Reliability Test

Index	No. of items	Reliability*
Learning achievements	16	0.846
Content of Training I	12	0.907
Content of Training II	13	0.888

*Chronbach alpha

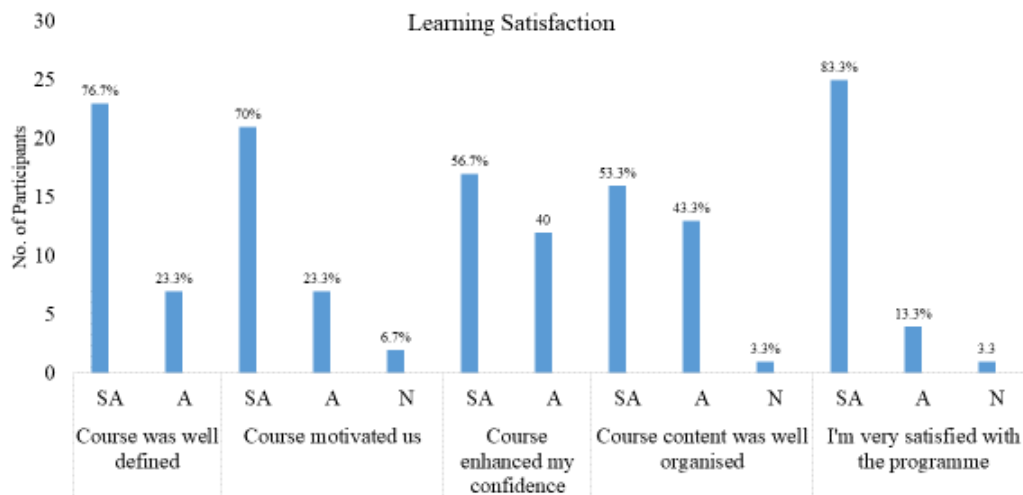
Results and Discussion

Upon analyzing the interviews, qualitative responses and quantitative data generated, five major themes were drawn which are discussed below.

General perceptions of the participants on the training

The study revealed the training as highly satisfying. The participants expressed their profound satisfaction on the training offered by the college.

Figure 2: Perception of students on the Learning from the training



The figure 2 above shows that around 96.7% of the participants are very satisfied with the learning from the training. The majority of the participants expressed that the “course was clearly defined” (100%), “course motivated them” (93.3%), “course enhanced their confidence” (96.7%), and the “course was well organised” (96.7%). A small section of the participants (3.3%) remained neutral, which also indicates that there are things that need improvement.

One of the participants (P1) said, “The training was indeed full package of knowledge, skills and strategies that would lead oneself, community and country as a whole in fulfilment of our profound philosophy of GNH”. Similarly, another (P7) shared that with the gained knowledge from training she could provide good services to the clients. She expressed that her performance and delivery of services has improved by many fold compared to the past.

The table 3 below shows the overall mean and the standard deviation of survey questionnaire rated by the participants. The average mean score of all the three parts of the questionnaires, which consisted of a total of 42 statements each rated out of 5 is 4.6 and the standard deviation is 0.53. The data reveals the evenness in the rating among the participants. It also reflects the high level of satisfaction derived from the training by the all the participants.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation

Mean and Standard Deviation	Overall learning satisfaction (17 statements)	Course Content Training I (12 statements)	Course Content Training I (13 statements)

Over all Mean	4.6	4.5	4.7
Over all SD	0.5	0.6	0.5

Relevancy and Usefulness of the training

When asked about the relevancy and usefulness of the training, majority of the participants (83%) expressed that the training was very relevant, useful and well organised. The sessions on Mindfulness Practice, Developing Bodichitta Mind, Self-care and Stress Management in Social Work and Project Cycle Management were found very unique and enriching, which they shared have enhanced their professional competency. Many (53.3%) of them stated that with the gained knowledge and skills, they are now able to use appropriate intervention and take right decisions in their work place.

One of the participants (P3) stated, “I had a wonderful training and now I could do thing more professionally”.

Some of the participants expressed their concern of most of the social workers in Bhutan not being trained as social work professionals.

A participant (P4) said, “Majority of our social workers are not trained but they have been providing their services as social work professionals. I think it’s high time that we have professionals in the field of social work” another (P5) shared, “What we do is social work and we are finally being certified as social workers,”

The opinion expressed by majority of the participants confirms the relevancy and usefulness of the training and their satisfaction.

Table 4. Summary of Participants Perceptions on Course content of Training I and II

Sl. No.	Course Content: Training I	Mean	SD	Rating	%
1	Introduction to Mindfulness Practice	4.5	0.5	Highly Satisfied	90
2	Introduction to Social Work	4.7	0.4	Highly Satisfied	94
3	Human Behaviour and Development	4.8	0.4	Highly Satisfied	96
4	Introduction to Buddhism and Social work	4.3	0.7	Highly Satisfied	86
5	Working with Individuals and Family	4.5	0.6	Highly Satisfied	90
6	Working with Special groups	4.5	0.6	Highly Satisfied	90
7	Introduction to social policy	4.6	0.6	Highly Satisfied	92
8	Integrating social work practice methods	4.4	0.6	Highly Satisfied	88
9	Communication and Interpersonal Skills	4.6	0.6	Highly Satisfied	92
10	Working with Marginalized Communities	4.3	0.7	Highly Satisfied	86
11	NGO/CSO administration and management	4.5	0.6	Highly Satisfied	90
12	Assignment Planning, support and assessment	4.4	0.6	Highly Satisfied	

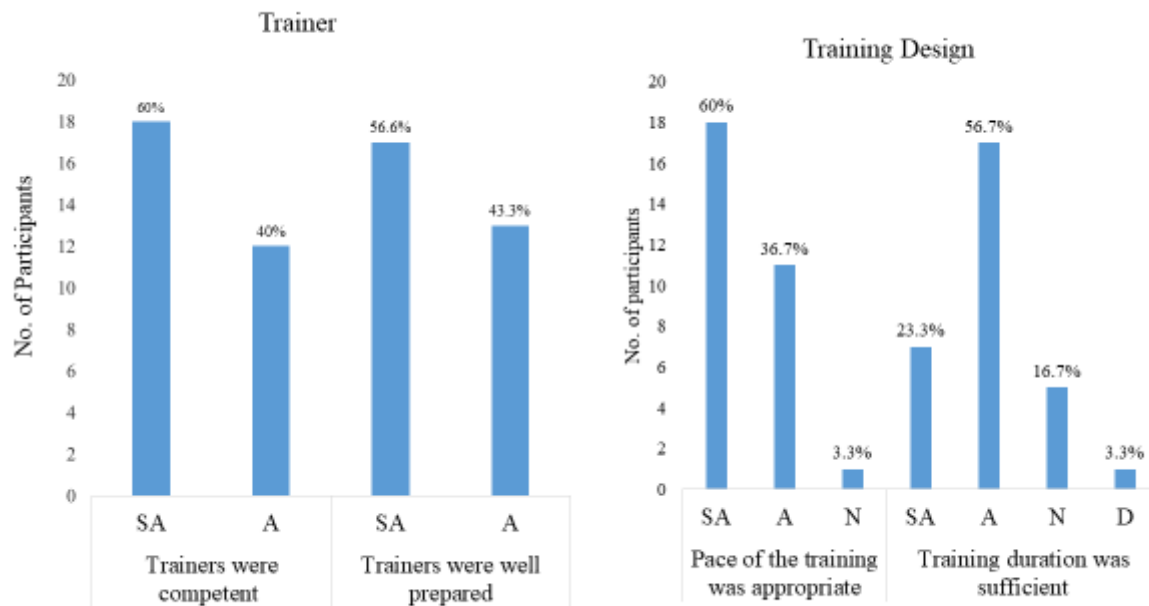
Sl. No.	Course Content: Training II	Mean	SD	Rating	%
1	Introduction to mindfulness practice and its relevance to social work	4.7	0.5	Highly Satisfied	94
2	Seminar - Assignment Presentations	4.3	0.6	Highly Satisfied	86
3	Participatory planning and development	4.6	0.5	Highly Satisfied	92
4	Project Cycle Management	4.6	0.5	Highly Satisfied	92
5	Developing Bodichitta Mind, Self-care and Stress Management in Social Work.	4.7	0.4	Highly Satisfied	94
6	C4D for Social and Behaviour Change	4.4	0.6	Highly Satisfied	88
7	Role of Social Workers in Communication and Advocacy – A Case of Tarayana Foundation	4.6	0.6	Highly Satisfied	92
8	Advocacy for Bringing about Social Change – A Case of Bhutan Toilet Organisation	4.7	0.5	Highly Satisfied	94
9	Working with Communities/Stakeholders – A Case of Forest Products Based Project in Eastern Bhutan.	4.4	0.6	Highly Satisfied	88
10	Health Policy and Social Service	4.5	0.5	Highly Satisfied	90
11	Social Work and Financial Sustainability - Developing Grant Proposals	4.8	0.4	Highly Satisfied	96
12	Advocating for Women and Children's Issues	4.6	0.5	Highly Satisfied	92
13	Social Work in Action – A Case of Bhutan Sharing and Loving Youth	4.6	0.5	Highly Satisfied	92

Trainers and the Training Design

Figure 3 below shows that all the participants have rated 'strongly agree' and 'agree' for 'facilitators being well trained and well prepared'. Similarly, more than 80% of the participants rated 'strongly agree' or 'agree' for the appropriateness of the pace and time allotted for the training. However, there were around 20% of them who either remained neutral or disagreed with the pace and time allotted for the training.

These ratings of the participants indicate that the facilitators were qualified and experienced professionals although there were some reservations with regard to pace and the time allotted for the training. Many of them have expressed their profound liking of SCE approach; unique aspects such as sessions on Mindfulness Practice, Developing Bodichitta Mind, Self-care and Stress Management in Social Work and the course being delivered by qualified and experienced professionals/academics engaged in teaching, research, administration, and other work in social work settings both from within and outside the country as shown in figure 3 below.

Figure 3: participants' perception on trainers and training design



Changes in their practice as a result of the training

Many of the Bhutanese social workers have been working with varied CSOs for more than a decade, without professional trainings and academic preparation. Therefore, one of the learning outcomes of the training was to enable the participants to work efficiently with individuals (children, women, elderly and persons with disabilities) and groups such as families and communities who need support and intervention of social work practitioners.

“In my three years stay at the Bhutan Cancer Society, I haven’t met with anyone who has any degree or background in social work. Through this course, I have gained a lot of knowledge and skills”, said one of the participants (P6). Similarly, around 80% of the participants stated that the training enhanced their competency to handle bigger project, design programmes that suits different target groups and apply different strategies and interventions in their own social work settings.

Areas for Improvement

While all the participants stated that the training was very relevant, useful and well organised, they also shared that certain aspects of the training could be improved to make it more efficient and relevant. Duration of the training being very short was one of the aspects that majority of the participants pointed out. They also shared that although the training was very relevant and useful, it was more theoretical, with less discussions and practical sessions. Therefore, there is a need to increase the duration and make it more interactive and practical.

Recommendation

Social workers need to be competent and prepared for varied challenges which they ought to face, ultimately. The finding also shows that most social workers in Bhutan have different educational background, mismatching their current field requirement.

As such, we recommend some of the approaches through which we can make our social workers professionally competent to bring about positive changes in our society. The following are some of the recommendations:

There is a need to introduce a diploma and degree course in Social Work in Bhutan for social work practitioners. Although SCE is launching a BA in Social Work from Autumn Semester, 2019, it is offered to high school graduates and not to in-service candidates.

The study revealed that many of the social work practitioners are aspiring to upgrade their qualification and professional competency through diploma, degree or master courses in social work. Therefore, the college should expand the programme and provide opportunity to in-service social work practitioners to pursue diploma, degree or master courses in social work in the near future.

The college may offer PD programme on different themes to meet the professional need of employees in government, CSOs, and other stakeholders whose work require knowledge and skills of social work. Today, due to the absence of a social work training institute in Bhutan CSOs are compelled to recruit employees with varying degrees although we know that pursuing a social work career without any professional training and experience entail several risk.

The college may think of branding/promoting social work courses that SCE is launching from July 2019 to the local, national and international community, which is unique in the region and the world because of some its distinctive features such as contents on mindfulness practice, developing Bodhichitta mind in social work, self-care and stress management in social work and two field practicum each for a duration of 6 months.

Conclusion

The key findings to the study revealed that Bhutan's first two certificate courses in social was very effective in enhancing the professional competence of the participants. Most participants considered the certificate training as an "eye-opening experience" with many suggesting that SCE should continue offering this forms of training, down the line. In addition, the study revealed that through this training, participants had developed the professional ethics and values besides relevant to their context.

The other recommendations include a need to introduce Professional Development (PD) programmes for social work practitioners in Bhutan, introduction of courses like diploma, degree and masters to upgrade the qualification and professional competency of social workers in Bhutan.

The study also found out that most social workers in Bhutan have different educational background, mismatching their current field requirement. Therefore, the study recommends an urgency to introduce professional development programmes (PD) for social work practitioners to enhance their competence and bring about positive changes in the society. Besides PD programmes, there is a need to introduce diploma, degree and masters course in social work to address the challenges faced by the contemporary society. For example, paucity of legal knowledge has been a major stumbling block for most social workers in Bhutan.

However, the study also discovered a major limitation that need to be considered while developing the programmes. One major problem is the unavailability of competent trainers. Although SCE organised the training with technical support from UNICEF, around 70% of the trainers were from other institutes within the country and outside. Around 40% of them were from institutes within the country and the rest 30% were from overseas, entailing huge financial cost to the institute. Overall, the training was found very relevant indicating SCE to organise such trainings and other related PD programme, down the line.

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