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Training Social Workers to Support Societies in Transition

At a time of major ecological, social, and demographic transitions, social work is a crucial lever for supporting the most vulnerable populations and preventing social divides. While governments and development partners are multiplying initiatives in social protection and inclusion, the training of social workers remains insufficiently recognized, promoted, and supported in many countries. Drawing on contrasting national experiences, this work analyzes the challenges and opportunities for strengthening these training programs, a key condition for sustainable and inclusive human development.

A crucial but overlooked issue

Contemporary societies are facing challenges of unprecedented scope—the green transition, demographic shifts, the digital transformation, the reconfiguration of human mobility—at a time of rising inequality, health and environmental crises, mass migration, and increasing economic precarity.

Faced with these upheavals, measures to support vulnerable populations have become a major component of development policy. Social safety nets, projects supporting socio-professional inclusion, initiatives promoting gender equality or the inclusion of people with disabilities, support for migrant populations, emergency crisis responses are all part of this effort. Policies and programs aimed at addressing, or at least mitigating, the hardships faced by individuals and communities have been adopted by states and international organizations worldwide.

Nevertheless, a key component underpinning these approaches remains largely overlooked: the education and training of social workers. As key actors in promoting social cohesion, social workers operate across a wide range of areas, including child protection, particularly for at-risk children, support

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to families facing severe hardship, and assistance to marginalized populations such as older people, persons with disabilities, refugees, and more broadly those excluded by economic or institutional systems.

The paradox is striking: Low- and middle-income countries have the most pressing needs but also the weakest systems for training social workers. Without properly qualified workers on the ground, development policies cannot have a lasting impact. Training social work professionals is thus both a question of social cohesion and a prerequisite for the success of development policies.

Understanding social work

Social work is simultaneously a form of support, a professional practice, and an academic discipline. According to the International Federation of Social Workers, it “promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people.” Often overshadowed by health and education, social work has its own specific domain: that of protection and inclusion.

Social work seeks to prevent exclusion and mitigate its effects by providing support while preserving the principle of empowerment. Its fundamental principles are social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversity.

Social work careers are numerous and varied: Community workers, social development professionals, social assistant workers, special needs teachers, early childhood educators, family mediators, intervention unit managers, directors of social establishments, and many others.

The field is a major provider of jobs, both in public bodies (government ministries, local authorities, social establishments) and in the private or charitable sector (NGOs, associations, international organizations, foundations, medico-social institutions, and the field of social and solidarity economy). For instance, there were around 1.3 million people employed in the field of social work in France in 2023.

Social work requires relational skills (including listening, mediation, appropriate communication) as well as the ability to assess situations and intervene appropriately (through social diagnosis, individualized support, and coordination with relevant actors). It also relies on rigorous ethical and professional standards grounded in respect for human rights. These essential

skills, needed to address complex situations, require sustained training and experience.

Social work training courses are based on a theoretical, interdisciplinary foundation that mobilizes approaches from social work alongside key insights from the human and social sciences—sociology, psychology (or social psychology), anthropology, economics, law. They take the form of structured learning pathways, either entry-level or advanced, offered by specialized institutions or universities, and they aim to prepare future professionals to work with competence, a sense of ethics, and methodological rigor.

Unequal and fragmented development

Historically speaking, the “formalized” social work (education and practices) emerged in industrialized countries in the nineteenth century out of charitable and philanthropic initiatives. As needs increased, the field gradually became professionalized and earned academic and institutional recognition.

Approaches to social work training vary significantly from country to country, reflecting different institutional and educational benchmarks. The university model dominant in the United States, Canada, or Chile treats social work as an academic discipline from the outset. By contrast, many countries prioritize specialized or extra-university institutions and schools, as in francophone Africa (Senegal, Republic of the Congo). The *Hautes écoles spécialisées* (HES) found in Belgium and Switzerland offer higher vocational education. The mixed model combines these institutions, with vocational schools for undergraduates and universities for postgraduates, as in France and Finland. In anglophone Africa (Egypt, Ethiopia) training courses are normally integrated into universities at an early stage. Regardless of the type of establishment, the basic training needed for a job in the field is a bachelor’s degree, often regulated by specific accreditation processes. Finally, all professional courses around the world must consist of a mix of theoretical teaching and practical placements, which make up an average of 30 to 50% of the training, making social work education a strongly practice-oriented professional pathway.

Social work training remains significantly underdeveloped in low- and middle-income countries. Often confined to a single national school—if it exists at all—it suffers from a shortage of qualified teachers and low institutional recognition. In the absence of a robust accreditation framework, the profession

continues to lack legitimacy and graduates struggle to find employment, hampering the implementation of robust social policies.

Contrasting national situations

A comparative study by the Agence française de développement (AFD; French Development Agency) (Tassé and Jovelin 2026) investigates five emblematic cases (Ethiopia, Senegal, Madagascar, Republic of the Congo, Ecuador) and reveals a common determination to professionalize social work, despite varied institutional trajectories. The involvement of international partners (AFD, UNICEF) and foreign universities is crucial for structuring training courses and strengthening local teaching teams. Ethiopia and Senegal offer successful models for the academic grounding and rapid creation of pathways up to the doctorate or master's level, with strong institutional support. The Republic of the Congo has established a coherent academic foundation with support from AFD, offering recognized degrees and strengthening placement supervision capacities. Structural obstacles still have a negative impact on the legal recognition and professional status of social workers, particularly in Madagascar and Ecuador. All the countries in the study emphasize the urgent need to train more teachers and to ensure stable governance and sustainable funding for training institutions. National integration, strategic management, and courses adapted to local realities are essential to ensure the sustainability of these programs.

Common challenges

Research on the development of social work has shown that heterogeneous training standards impede job mobility, especially because the associated professions often suffer from a lack of institutional recognition, limiting career opportunities and contributing to the absence of clearly defined professional roles and status.

A recurring structural issue is the limited availability of training programs. In many low-income countries, there is only one national institution, which is often under-resourced and lacks adequate infrastructure. These challenges contribute to significant regional inequalities in access to training, as provision is often concentrated in capital cities. Expanding decentralized and hybrid training models is therefore essential to ensure equitable access. The standard of educators and teachers is often insufficient, particularly in supervising field

placements, further exacerbating the shortage of qualified personnel. Absent or weak accreditation systems and unstable governance undermine the quality of courses and the employability of graduates, an issue that requires a clear strategic framework. Training programs still do not fully integrate crucial contemporary challenges, such as environmental issues (green social work), migration, and gender and equality.

Although social work in high-income countries is dominated by women, who represent up to 85% of students (particularly at undergraduate level), in many low- or middle-income countries the workforce is male-dominated. This makes it particularly important to integrate a gender perspective into training *curricula*, ensuring that professionals are trained to adopt an intersectional approach to structural inequalities and gender-based violence.

Future prospects

At a time of multiple, permanent transitions, improving training programs for social workers is essential to prepare societies for future challenges. Capitalization studies outline various pathways for improving social work training:

1. Develop an integrated national strategy that clearly articulates the link between the training of social workers and social, health, and education policies and is backed by strong political commitment.
2. Strengthen the connection between theory and practice by combining classroom learning with placements, recognizing the role of placement supervisors, and employing active, reflective educational methods.
3. Diversify training options by offering hybrid or remote programs to ensure access in isolated areas and reduce regional inequalities.
4. Enhance the status of the profession by officially recognizing degrees and competency frameworks in order to improve working conditions and make career paths more secure.
5. Turn training establishments into hubs of innovation and research by supporting action-research and integrating contemporary topics into courses (gender, migration, environment).
6. Ensure sustainable funding from the state, supported by strategic partnerships, to guarantee equal access to training and strengthen interregional and international cooperation.

Schema 1 - Training the social workers of tomorrow



Conclusion: Investing in social cohesion

Social work is an often overlooked yet essential pillar of contemporary societies. It plays a critical role in responding to social, environmental, and migration crises, and a key element in the construction of fairer, more inclusive societies. To meet these challenges, it is essential to boost professionalization through integrated national strategies, situating the training of social workers at the intersection of social, health, and education policies. Successful attempts, often supported by international actors, demonstrate the benefits of combining theory with practical placements and of firm academic foundations to ensure

robust skills. The future of the sector requires increased investment in the training of educators, the development of academic partnerships, the adaptation of *curricula* to local realities, and the integration of contemporary issues such as the green transition and gender. The status of the profession can also be enhanced by officially recognizing degrees and implementing common competency frameworks backed by sustainable public funding. Finally, training options must be diversified to include hybrid or remote programs so as to create inclusive, sustainable systems that can serve as the foundation for more resilient human development, capable of supporting the social, environmental, and demographic transitions of the future.

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