

## Professional social work for sustainable development. Evidence from East Africa

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Social work is an internationally recognized profession whose main task is to help individuals, families, and communities to cope with social problems and life challenges. Its functions are remedial, preventive, and transformative. According to a widely accepted global definition, social work “promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people”. (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014)

Despite the important role social work plays in contemporary societies, the profession is still rather weak in contexts of many developing countries, particularly in Africa. But it is in these contexts where poverty is most pervasive; where basic social, educational, and health services are in a constant state of crisis; where human rights violations are widespread; where ethnic clashes and political violence are prevalent; and where environmental degradation is affecting the very survival of the people. It is in these contexts where skilled social workers can play their part towards better societies and the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thus, the challenge lies with higher education institutions where social work education and training takes place.

Since 2010, a project called PROSOWO (Promotion of Professional Social Work in East Africa) has been implemented in countries of the East African Community in order to promote social work and strengthen its role in social development and poverty reduction. Institutional partners of the project are universities from Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Austria. The project consists of a series of intertwined activities, namely: empirical research; enhanced education and training; capacity building; and increased engagement of social work personnel in social policy and human rights advocacy. In the course of the project, perspectives of more than 2,000 stakeholders got involved in the research. Subsequently, the research findings were translated into social work curricula and into a series of publications which nowadays serve as key references in virtually all schools of social work in the region. Additionally, a number of workshops, symposia, conferences, and social actions were held in order to raise awareness about the important role of this profession and reach out to the public and policy makers alike.

Currently, the project is in its second phase, with a focus on research on indigenous and locally relevant innovative models of social work practice. Social work educators must be familiar with culture-specific knowledge and ways of coping; social work students must learn these knowledge and corresponding skills at training level; consequently, social work practitioners will be better equipped when dealing with social problems at grassroots level. Coupled with further capacity building activities, the PROSOWO project has been designed to have a tangible impact on the lives of poor and marginalized people by highly qualified social workers and improved social services. It is an example of good practice which can inspire initiatives in other regions of the world.