
UNIT 5 SOCIAL ACTION AS A METHOD OF SOCIAL WORK

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit proposes better understanding of social action as a method of social work. Further, the unit would also help you to understand the relation of social action with other methods of social work like casework, group work, community organisation, social welfare administration and social work research. After going through this unit you would be able to comprehend how the knowledge and skills of other methods of social work are required in social action.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Social problems and conflicts have remained an integral part of the society from the time immemorial. For providing relief and solution to these problems, social work and social welfare have also remained a part of human society. Professional social work utilizes certain methods to work with the people in view of empowering the people to solve their problems. Among the methods of social work, social action is a new introduction in the professional social work practice. Though its relevance is often felt in the field situations, social workers do not practice this method quite frequently. The inherent theme behind social action is re-adjustment of the social institutions and redistribution of power and resources for social justice and empowerment of the community. As a method of social work, social action mobilizes the general population to bring about structural changes in the social system.

Also, the relation of social action with other methods of social work is very important to understand. Social action process heavily rests on other social work methods like group work and community organisation. In fact, social action comes into the picture when people's needs and problems remain unmet and unsettled through other methods of social work. Social action seems to be a step forward to community organisation. Social work research helps in perceiving the social problem objectively. Group work and casework are the foundation of social action where people are mobilized to confront authorities. Social welfare

administration gives the ground to social workers to prepare the community for social action. Social workers make use of the skills and experiences gained through other methods of social work in the process of social action.

5.2 SOCIAL ACTION: A METHOD OF SOCIAL WORK

Every profession has a tested body of knowledge, which includes principles, techniques, methods, procedures, tools and terminology of its own. The same is applicable with the professional social work. Social work has six methods for working with people (casework, group work, community organisation, social action, social welfare administration and social work research). These methods are the techniques of enabling the people for better social functioning. Social action, as a method of professional social work practice, is an organised effort to change or improve social and economic institutions through organisation and mobilization of the community people. Unlike other social work methods, social action emphasizes on long-term essential changes in established social institutions. Social action covers movements of social, religious and political reform, social legislation, racial and social justice, human rights, freedom and civic liberty. Previously social action was considered as a tool within the field of community organisation, but now it has been considered as a separate technique of social work and as such a fourth process (see Siddiqui, 1984).

Why social action is considered as a method of professional social work? A method of professional social work is a technique or approach having characteristics like: an established process with easily recognizable stages, based on the philosophy of social work, having principles or guidelines or theories, skills of working with people which are learned and refined through professional guidance. Let us view social action within these parameters.

Social action process, more or less, passes through the recognizable and systematic stages. First of all, a scientific analysis or research on the social problem affecting the community people is carried out. Then, awareness is generated regarding various aspects of the problem and people are encouraged to take collective and collaborative action to solve the problem. Third stage is centred on organising people for coordinated and directed intervention whereas in further stage suitable strategies are developed to achieve the goals and lastly, action is taken. Every social action process passes through these stages and professional social workers or actionists are well-equipped with knowledge and skills required in different stages.

As a method of social work, social action adheres to the philosophy of professional social work. It does not blame people for the deficiency or problem. It strongly believes in the worth and dignity of human beings. Social action rejects the doctrine of laissez-faire and survival of the fittest. The unfit person has the same fundamental rights as do the more fit, and the rich or powerful is not necessarily fit, and nor a poor or weak is indeed unfit. It adopts a commitment to the capacity of all the people to take action to improve their life circumstances. It grounds this action on a process of open participation in which people, preferably collectively, explore the underlying social issues of their life situations as the foundation for action. Practitioners do not lead, but, through a non-elitist highly skilled process, they facilitate members in making choices and taking action for themselves.

Like any other method of professional social work, social action does have certain principles, details of which are given in the previous unit. Very briefly, these principles are mentioned here. Firstly, the community people must have the faith and confidence in the social worker (principle of credibility building). The social actionist or social worker should make the people believe that their actions to achieve the set goals are legitimate (principle of legitimization). Certain strategies adopted like dharna, morcha, slogans, emotional powerful speeches, rallies create dramatic effects in social action (principle of dramatization). Social action does not depend on a single strategy, rather it adopts many different ways and means to achieve the goal (principle of multiple strategies). Social action must not rest only on conflictual activities with authorities. It should also concentrate on constructive developmental activities along with confrontation (principle of dual approach). Social action does not confine itself to a single aspect of the social issue. Rather, it emphasizes on programmes having multi-prong aspects like social, economic, cultural, etc. (principle of manifold programmes). Social workers or actionists, during social action, make use of these principles for achieving the overall goal of social justice.

Social action has a definite set of goals and objectives. The goal of social action is redistribution with regard to resources and power to provide social justice to all. Its objective is the proper shaping and development of socio-cultural environment in which a richer and fuller life may be possible for all the citizens. Social action aims at prevention of needs, solution of mass problems, improvement in mass conditions, influencing institutions, policies and practices, introduction of new mechanisms or programmes, redistribution of power, resources (human, material and moral) and improvement in health, education and welfare.

Social action employs certain strategies and tactics as tools to attain its goals, which makes it different from other social work methods. They are negotiation, persuasion, competition, disruption, collaboration, bargain, strikes, boycotts, fasts, tax-refusal, sit-ins, picketing, marches, fraternization, haunting, leafleting, reversal strike, obstruction, renouncing honours, etc. Here, it may be stressed again that violence and blood-shedding are not at all included in strategies used to confront the authorities.

Social workers, practicing social action are well versed with certain skills that are developed through teaching-learning and training. They have the skills of rapport building, objective analysis of the social situation and problems, knowledge and ability to use other methods of social work like casework, group work, social welfare administration adequately and appropriately. The social workers do have the ability to use his relationship with clients and community constructively. This relationship is characterized by objectivity and confidentiality on the one hand and sensitivity and warmth on the other. Social workers have in their command the techniques of programme planning, organisation, coordination and administrative and managerial skills.

Social action is a method of social work, which is, used for/with/by any unit of society larger than sociologically defined community. It is an organised effort to change or improve social and economic institutions, as distinguished from other methods of social work, which do not characteristically cover essential changes in established institutions through confrontation with the authorities. It may be described as organised group effort to solve mass problems or to further socially desirable objectives by attempting to influence or change basic social and economic conditions or practices. It always involves public pressure in one form or the other. However, it does not approve of physical coercion or violence. Another aim of social action, which has been mentioned by many social work scholars, is formulation of or change in

existing social legislation. Once the legislation comes into force, its implementation at the ground level is another salient task of social actionists or social workers. Thus we see that social action, as a method of social work profession, is a powerful tool of bringing about positive changes in the social system for the betterment of the masses.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of this unit.

1) State whether the following statements are true or false:

- i) Community organization and social action are synonymous terms.
- ii) Social action sometimes requires violence and blood shedding.
- iii) Macro problems like poverty and child labour can be solved through social action.
- iv) Social action is not treated as a method of professional social work.
- v) Only the social worker and some local leaders decide on the social issue and strategies to be employed during social action process.
- vi) Social action does not rely on other methods of social work.
- vii) Social action involves confrontation with authorities.
- viii) Social justice and empowerment are the goals of social action.
- ix) Social action is carried out to fulfill the vested interests of a few powerful people.
- x) Social action rests on the philosophy of competition and struggle.
- xi) People's participation and their right to determination are ignored in social action.

5.3 SOCIAL ACTION IN RELATION TO CASEWORK

Social Action does utilize other social work methods in the process of attaining its goal of community empowerment. In fact, we see that the whole process of social action is the amalgamation of various methods of social work. In this section of the unit, we would try to understand the relation of other methods of social work with that of social action. Let us first pay attention to social casework.

As we already know that social casework is a method of social work to help individuals to cope more effectively with their social problems. The psychosocial problem(s) of the client are dealt mainly in one-to-one relationship between the client and the caseworker. The relation of social action with casework can be understood with the fact that individuals and society are interdependent. Most of the problems, which affect an individual, have connections with or repercussions to his/her inter-personal relations. These inter-personal relations could be within the family and/or with various institutions in the community, say, educational institutions, work place, legal, neighbourhood, friends, etc. So, casework process

may involve interventions not only at the family level but also at the institutions in the larger community. The client may be having the same social problem, which the social worker is addressing, at the macro level through social action. In such a situation, caseworker needs to build confidence and faith among the client and prepare him/her to be a part of social action process.

Let us view the relevance of social casework in social action. Apparently, there appears no connection between the two methods of social work. However, during initial process of credibility building in the community, the social worker makes use of casework in dealing with those members of the clientele group who are facing some adjustment problems and require therapeutic help for harmonious social functioning. To exemplify, if the social worker finds a member showing problematic behaviour in the group sessions, which is affecting the working and integrity of the group, he/she takes up separate casework sessions with that member. After making the social investigation (psycho-social study) adequate social diagnosis is done. Once the member having problematic behaviour starts showing better social functioning, the group also becomes cohesive.

It may be noted that casework is required not only in the initial stages of social action, it may be needed when the community is organised to take appropriate action against the authorities. At that time also, any member of the core group may start showing deviant behaviour and as a result, may require counselling from the social worker.

Added to this, the skills a social worker uses for social investigation and diagnosis during casework process, learning human behaviour, psycho-social problems, using caseworker-client relationship for building confidence and courage in the client for solving his problems becomes quite handy in the process of social action when the social worker has to deal with not only one individual, but many types of personalities simultaneously and keep them integrated for the targeted social goals.

5.4 SOCIAL ACTION IN RELATION TO GROUP WORK

The importance of social group work can be understood with the fact that a man is considered a group animal. Group experiences are the essential needs of human beings. A human turns from a biological being to a social being through group life. Attention may now be paid to social group work, which is a method through which individuals develop the ability of establishing constructive relationships with each other through group activities.

Social group work acts as a building block in the process of social action. Group members learn organisation, cooperation and coordination. They learn interdependence and democratic values. In the group work process, while participating in the activities of the group, the group members learn to live and work together to attain some specific goals. Social group work solves adjustment problems and enhances positive interpersonal relations. It prepares the individuals to learn and share responsibility in working together. All these factors contribute to the success of social action taken up for a social cause influencing a large segment of the population.

During the social group work process, the group members learn to respect each other's views and take criticisms positively. They learn emotional control and tolerance, empathy and sympathy, breaking down prejudices and enhancing problem solving capacity. It teaches the individuals to keep their personal likes-dislikes, aspirations, perceptions, and ego-hassles

aside and work towards the goals planned by the group as a whole. Such a learning opportunity prepares the individuals for a social change and the chances of failure of a movement due to internal conflicts are substantially minimized. Social group work also explores leadership qualities among its members. These leaders, in turn, take up the responsibility of mass mobilization and targeted activities in social action process.

Added to this, social group work also helps the social worker to refine his/her skills of dealing with different personalities to work for common goals. The social worker resolves various intra-group conflicts and personality clashes. These skills and experiences become handy while dealing with conflicting situations between different groups during the process of social action. The group worker makes use of programme media in social group work. It contributes to programme planning and management in a better way while dealing with many groups during social action process. Experiences of social group work with one group help a lot in managing many groups when the whole community is mobilized for a common social cause.

In addition, the social worker, during initial stage of group formation and during group work process establishes rapport with the community people and gains knowledge about various structural and functional aspects of the community, a precursor to studying a social problem, which is affecting a large section of the community and undertaking mass movement and social action for remedies. The social worker gains credibility in the community during the group work process, which is one of the main requirements of social action. So, social group work acts as a slapping stone in the process of social action.

5.4 SOCIAL ACTION IN RELATION TO COMMUNITY ORGANISATION

Social action shares many similarities with community organisation. Sometimes there is a debate whether social action is a part of community organisation or is completely a different entity. Some believe that it is a part of community organisation. The problem of confusing social action with community organisation arises mainly on account of lack of agreement as to what the term community stands for in social work. While community organisation is meant for a limited geographical area – the ‘community’, social action has larger context. It signifies the society, say, nation-state. Social action definitely has a larger scope and impact.

Some of the techniques used by both the methods (social action and community organisation) may be common but they differ in their approach. Community organisation is a process of effective coordination of different agencies within a particular area and involves cooperative planning and implementation of social policy relating to the area. However, social action as a process is used for tackling issues, which are of a much wider nature than issues affecting a particular area.

Community organisation is an integral part of social action. It is the precursor or pre-requirement to social action. In fact, many of the social work professionals consider social action as an extension of community organisation. Community organisation, as defined by Ross (1955), is a process by which a community identifies its needs or objectives, orders or ranks these needs or objectives, develops the confidence and will to work at those needs or objectives, finds the resources (internal and/or external) to deal with these needs or objectives, takes action in respect of them, and in doing so extends and develops cooperative

and collaborative attitudes and practices in the community. Social action is a conflictual process of varying intensity to bring about or prevent changes in the social system through the process of making people aware of the socio-political and economic realities conditioning their lives and by mobilizing them to organise themselves for bringing about the desired change, or to prevent the change that adversely affects them, through the use of whatever strategies they may find workable, with the exception of violence.

Thus, we see that ‘organising people or community or target population’ is the common thread between community organisation and social change. In both the methods of social work, people are helped to realize their needs or problems and in finding out the solution of their felt needs. People organise themselves, collaborate and cooperate and work together for a commonly accepted goal. In both the processes, that is, community organisation and social action, need or problem identification is the first step. It is followed by making the people aware of their pressing need or problem, that is, prioritizing the problems. An environment is created in which the community people feel confidence and gain faith that together they would be able to solve their pressing problems or meet their needs. Emotional impulse to meet the need and to take required action quickly is inherent in both the processes.

However, in social action, change of authority and power structure is involved which invariably requires some degree of conflictual process. It is the redistribution of resources and power. So, we see that social action is community organisation with the aim of bringing about or preventing long lasting social change where confrontation with the existing authority is involved. The strategies and tactics involved in social action like, propaganda, picketing, strike, boycott, sit-in, fast, etc. make social action different from community organisation.

When just by integrating the community to work together and mobilizing the available resources, such development is not sufficient for achieving the set goals, because of accumulation of power and resources is in the hands of a few people who are not ready to work for the community development, social action comes into play. The goal of social action is redistribution of power and resources so that all the sections of the community get equitable share and opportunity for optimum growth and development. Once this objective is achieved, people’s participation is used for constructive activities in the community. People’s participation is the key term common in both, community organisation and social action. Social action is, thus, one step further to community organisation.

5.6 SOCIAL ACTION IN RELATION TO SOCIAL WELFARE ADMINISTRATION

Before looking into the relation between social action and social welfare administration, let us first take a brief look at social welfare administration as a method of social work. It is the process by which we apply professional approach to certain goals and transform social policy into social action. It is a process of planning, implementing, directing, monitoring, organising, coordinating and evaluation of services rendered for the welfare and development of the people. Social welfare administration is mainly concerned with providing social welfare services like activities related to child care, women’s development, etc., in an organisational set-up and thus translating the social mandates into operational policies. The organisation delivering these social services does have a definite set of goals, staffing pattern and adequate administrative and managerial skills.

Let us take an example in order to understand social action in relation to social welfare administration. An NGO working with children in a slum area provides night shelter, mid-day meals, non-formal education and other developmental and recreational activities. Soon, the social workers realize that just providing these services is not providing any relief to the working children. Parents want their children to work and earn rather than participate in the activities of NGOs. The employers of these children not only pay very less for their hours of tedious work, but also abuse them physically, emotionally and even sexually. Many children are lured by drug peddlers and they are used for illegal work. Added to this, the apathetic attitude of police towards the whole situation worsens the situation. In such circumstances, the NGO realizes it cannot play a substantive role in the well-being of the children just by adhering to its already set policies and programmes. No matter how well the NGO is performing its services, it cannot improve the living conditions of the children unless and until it decides to take up firm steps for bringing about structural changes in the social system. It needs to take up interventions like shaking up the conscience of the family members, police, government administration, general public, school authorities and most important the employers, advocate for change in government policies which are pro-child welfare and development and effective implementation of the same at the ground level. So, we see that unless strict and firm steps like confrontation, negotiation, demonstration, etc. are done, which is social action, the services rendered by a social welfare agency remain superficial. It clearly shows the relationship of social welfare administration and social action.

Social welfare agency, working in the community, provides a working ground to take up social cause at the macro level with people's participation. All the preliminary works needed for social action, say, rapport building, in-depth knowledge about the community and its social problems, credibility building and the like are done by social welfare administration.

Now, let us examine the skills a social worker acquires and/or refines in a social welfare administration. The social worker does planning of social goals and policies for the agency. Planning is an intellectual and crucial activity requiring adequate knowledge and vision about social causes. Good planning is a prerequisite for a successful service delivery. This skill is of key importance during carrying out social action for a social cause. Secondly, organising skills has been referred to as the administrator's raw material. Needless to mention how crucial this skill is for mobilizing people for taking up social action against authorities. The social worker also requires skills in staffing. Staffing means recruitment, training, orientation and supervision. During social action, though these skills are not applied apparently and directly but experiences of working with people, training them, dealing with their aspirations, different working patterns, conflicts, etc. help the social worker to manage the people participating in mass mobilization and collective action taken during social action. In the same way, skills acquired and refined by a social worker in social welfare administration like budgeting, evaluating, reporting, directing, all become handy during social action.

5.7 SOCIAL ACTION IN RELATION TO SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

Social work research is the systematic and scientific study of social problems, and its objective is to produce knowledge that can be used in planning and carrying out social work programmes and (if the need arises) social action. Social work research is a very powerful tool in social action. It helps in 'knowing' the social problem, its intensity and extensiveness, its causal factors, its impact on the target population and its repercussions on the social life of

the people. It also gives the understanding of the factual ground realities (and not mere perceptions) of the social situations, which in turn helps in conceptualizing the pros and cons of various possible social interventions. So, a systematic study of a social problem, and looking for remedies through social work intervention, is a must for the attainment of goals through social action.

It is social work research, which helps social activists to gain in-depth knowledge about the social problem, the factors contributing to it, and its impact on the sociocultural and economic aspects of life. The findings of the research help in formulating the goals for social change, designing the intervention and planning their strategies and tactics accordingly. Research on the problems which affect the disadvantaged, and then conscientizing them (the public as well as the policy makers), can have considerable effects. Social work needs to highlight such research to a great extent than the ordinary surveys of “social problems” which tend to neglect the interplay of powerful social forces causing these problems.

Social work research is a careful, critical, scientific and objective way of investigation of the social need or problem. It is free from biases and prejudices. It gives clarity to the social issue. The social worker needs the base of social work research to carry out social action as its absence may lead to wrong and inadequate perception of the problem. The planning of interventions based on such inadequate data and findings would obviously be faulty. As a result, social action may fail to adhere to its basic philosophy of the goal of community well-being.

Social planning and social action would be ineffective without proper research. Social work research enables social workers to satisfactorily assess the needs of the community and make their interventions and programmes very effective, useful and worthwhile. The social worker shares the findings of social work research with the community people through groups and then with people’s participation; careful and meticulous interventions are chalked out for social action. It helps the social worker to observe and record the relationship of individuals and groups in actual operating situations. Through social work research, the social worker or social actionist gets the right perspective or picture of the social problem, which is essential for the success of social action in attaining its goal.

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of this unit.

1) Write short notes (word limit 50 words) on:

- a) Social action and social group work.
- b) Social action and community organization.

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5.8 LET US SUM UP

Social action is a method of professional social work aimed at solving social problems through redistribution of power and resources. Its objective is to achieve social justice and empowerment of the community. Social action mobilizes the general population to bring about structural changes in the social system.

Social action is weighed through certain parameters to establish that it is a method of professional social work. It has a recognized process with easily identifiable stages. It rests on the philosophy that every individual is worthy and has the capacity to improve his life conditions. Like any other method of professional social work, social action does have certain principles and social workers or actionists, during social action, make use of these principles for achieving the overall goal of social justice. Social action does have a definite set of goals of providing social justice to all. It employs certain strategies and tactics like negotiation, persuasion, competition, disruption, collaboration, bargaining, strikes, boycotts to attain its objectives, which makes it different from other social work methods. However, it rejects violence and blood-shedding. Social workers practicing social action are well-versed in certain skills that are developed through teaching-learning and training.

Social action depends upon other methods of social work during its process. The role of social action is visible when people's problems remain unsolved through other methods of social work. Social casework and group work can be taken as the base to social action where people are mobilized to confront authorities. Social action is considered to be a step forward to community organisation. Social work research helps in identifying objective and developing critical perception of the social problem. Social welfare administration provides the ground to social workers to prepare the community for social action. Social workers utilize skills of other methods of social work in the process of social action.

5.9 KEY WORDS

- Social Action** : Social action seems to suggest efforts directed towards changes in law or social structure or towards the initiation of new movements for the modification of the current social practices.
- Social Casework** : Social case work is the process of assisting an individual, facing adjustment problems with his/her social environment, to have better social functioning.
- Social Group Work** : It is a process and a method through which individuals and groups in social agency settings are helped by a worker to relate themselves to other people and to experience growth and opportunities in accordance with their needs and capacities.
- Community Organisation** : It is a process of working at the community level, groups and neighbourhood to bring about desired improvement in their social well-being.

Social Welfare Administration : Social welfare work administration is the process by which we apply professional competence to certain goals and transform social policy into social action.

Social Work Research : It means a careful, critical and systematic enquiry into or investigation of a social problem; an effort to find fresh information by experimentation and study, and a process by which we try to find answers to problems of social work.

5.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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5.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

- 1)
 - i) False
 - ii) False
 - iii) True
 - iv) False
 - v) False
 - vi) False
 - vii) True
 - viii) True
 - ix) False
 - x) False

xi) False

Check Your Progress II

- 1) a) **Social action social group work:** Social group work acts as a building block in the process of social action. Group members learn organization, cooperation, coordination, interdependence and democratic values in social group work. It teaches the individuals to keep their personal likes-dislikes, aspirations, perceptions, ego-hassles aside and work towards the goals planned by the group as a whole. Social group work explores leadership qualities among its members who in turn mobilize the masses for social action process. The social worker gains credibility in the community during the group work process, which is one of the main prerequisite of social action.
- b) **Social action and community organization:** Community organizations is an integral part of social action. It is the pre-requirement to social action. Social action is often considered an extension of community organization. People's participation is the common thread between the two methods. In both the methods of social work, people are helped to organize themselves, collaborate and cooperate and work together for commonly accepted goal (s). However, in social action the aim is redistribution of resources and power, which may require some degree of conflictual process. So, social action is community organization with the aim of bringing about desired social changes where confrontation with the existing authority may occur.

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