



SOCIAL WORKERS REAP BENEFITS FROM INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES

In recent years, the Social Work profession has become increasingly recognized as a global human rights based profession equipped to deal with a range of issues and challenges confronting urban and rural communities worldwide. As the global community continues to face health disparities, poverty, an increase in orphans and vulnerable children, gender based violence and related critical issues, social workers are able to build and expand collaborations with in-country professionals and programs to promote comprehensive, culturally competent services.

Social Workers worldwide, including here in the U.S., are facing similar challenges due to common societal and economic upheavals. Some problems can only be solved with local know-how. But there are many that could benefit from “outside the box” perspectives. That “outside” experience provides insights and solutions that may have never been considered otherwise. What could be more “outside” than outside one’s own country.

But many social workers—those working closest to social challenges—commonly find it difficult to imagine how an international experience could benefit them and their every-day social work practice. How could visiting another country and talking to social workers meeting the challenges of their own countries make a difference? The NASW International Committee seeks to answer that question and to encourage social workers to reach out for international experiences.

Listed below are just a few outcomes and reflections by social work practitioners who have participated in international experiences.

SOCIAL WORKERS’ REFLECTIONS UPON AN INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE:

- “Experiencing another culture’s approach makes me re-examine our ways of practicing in our home city.”
- “This international experience has enriched me and my work in my home city and I return with many new ideas to help our social work.”
- “Viewing another culture’s interventions enables me to consider aspects of my practice and while not wholly importing techniques, it provides the opportunity to review, evaluate, and modify my own practice.”
- “Exchanges begin to build an interconnected web of international experiences and specialties to improve social services globally.”
- “I am a little bit of another person after this international experience and I think it is very important to do this.”
- “If you do not see and experience the person’s culture, you do not see and experience the whole person and may make untrue assumptions.”
- “It really is one big world. Intellectually, I was amazed how similar the services are, I had expected huge difference that did not occur. However, the techniques are clearly different due to cultural differences and sensitivities about family rights.”

- “Going to a different cultural context allows one to see things from a different perspective, which in turn strengthens and straightens one’s own.”
- “I have learned the importance of developing meaningful, impactful international collaborations and alliances for the mutual benefit of all, especially the local service community.”

INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE OUTCOMES:

Experiencing another culture’s “best practices” models and methods helps one see how those already tested solutions could improve your own work. As we look to address common social problems and challenges gaining a perspective from another country can help provide insight on ways in which social welfare policies and practices can be improved. International exchanges also imbue participants with a broader vision from local to world-wide (we’re all in this together).

As one example, one social worker who participated in an international exchange presented another culture’s approach to youth residential facilities to her agency. Subsequently their agency setting initiated a new policy incorporating that culture’s more dynamic interactions between ages and genders to enhance youth functioning.

One social worker took back to their city another culture’s strong emphasis of not only treating the individual but strengthening families through social services. Yet another social worker brought back from another culture a “harm reduction” model to be used in their work with the homeless population.

Participants in international exchanges gain a heightened appreciation of the need for knowledge of global priorities and strategies to advance social work education, research, knowledge development and practice skill development while building organizational

capacity through sustainable projects. They also develop a sense of camaraderie in international social work exchanges that can lead to future collaborations.

A benefit of international exchange programs is a fundamental respect and appreciation for indigenous cultural practices in shaping the social work context. For example, participants are better able to reflect on one’s own professional practice and hopefully further their cultural humility/cultural competence skills.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES TO INVESTIGATE:

If you are interested in participating in a cultural exchange at some point in your social work career, listed below are websites of organizations that help provide social workers with international exchange experiences of one sort or another. We hope you find these helpful and that you will consider an international exchange one day.

Council of International Fellowships:

www.cif-netherlands.org

Fulbright: <http://eca.state.gov/fulbright>

Katherine Kendall Institute For International Social

Work: www.cswe.org/CentersInitiatives/KAKI.aspx

Social Workers Across Nations:

<http://socialworkers.org/nasw/swan/default.asp>

Social Workers Beyond Borders:

www.socialworkersbeyondborders.org

Contact your local universities, which may welcome you joining a study abroad experience as a “special student.”