

The Development of Professional Social Work Practice in Central Highland in Vietnam: The Gap between Policy Aims and Actual Implementation

Nguyen Thi Thu Ha and Nguyen Thi Nhu Trang

Faculty of Sociology, Hanoi University of Social Sciences and Humanities, 336 Nguyen Trai, Hanoi, Vietnam

Professional social work has been strongly promoted by Vietnam Government in recent decade, in order to meet the need of increasingly vulnerable groups in a rapidly changing society as Vietnam. However, a question remained unanswered: how far does the current supply of professional social work practice meet the demand for social work practice? Are there any challenges or obstacles needed to be overcome so that social work can function better? Answering these questions is particularly significant for areas home to a high number of vulnerable people, whereas their geographical condition is disadvantageous and socio-economic condition is underdeveloped, such as Tay Nguyen – the Central Highland of Vietnam. Employing questionnaire survey, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussion, this research is to analyze how social work profession is being developed in Tay Nguyen in conjunction with the specific history and culture of this highland area, the effort to develop social work of central government, and the real situation in grassroot agencies. This study found some key obstacles for the development of professional social work in Tay Nguyen, which reflect the general barriers against social work development in Vietnam but, at the same times, have some distinctive features due to the distinctive socio-cultural features of Tay Nguyen.

Key Words: professional social work development, Tay Nguyen, central highland, ethnic minorities

Introduction


In 2010, Vietnam Government approved a project often called ‘Project 32’ to develop professional social work in Vietnam. This is a response to the increasing vulnerability of disadvantaged groups in a rapidly changing society as Vietnam such as lonely elderly, orphans, homeless children, or disabled people. In accordance, social work education has been strongly promoted all over Vietnam, annually supplying a high number of well-trained social workers. However, does this policy, together with the strong development - regarding to both quantity and quality - of social work education centers, actually lead to the development of professional social work practice? Whether or not current supply of professional social work practice meets the demand for social work practice? Are there any challenges or obstacles needed to be overcome so that social work can function better? Answering these questions is particularly significant for areas home to a high number of vulnerable people, whereas geographical conditions are disadvantageous and socio-economic conditions are underdeveloped, such as Tay Nguyen.

The main source of data for this paper was drawn from a research titled ‘Studying the process of social work education and human resource development in Tay Nguyen provinces nowadays’ (Code: VII2.3-

2012.03) funded by the Ministry of Science and Technology. This research was conducted in five provinces in Tay Nguyen area, with 500 survey participants representatives for three different parties as social workers, social work clients, and social work administrators and managers. Beside questionnaire survey, some quantitative methods as in-depth interviews and group discussion were also conducted to collect data for the assessment.

By analyzing that data, this paper is to bring to light the way professional social work has been developed in Vietnam, by analyzing the interaction between the way policy for social work development is implemented and the social environment in which this policy is implemented. This paper will start with a brief introduction to the historical background of social work development in Vietnam, then analyze the need for professional social work in Tay Nguyen

Corresponding author. Assoc.Prof. Nguyen Thi Thu Ha
Faculty of Sociology, Hanoi University of Social Sciences and Humanities, 336 Nguyen Trai, Hanoi, Vietnam. Email: Ha_va_ha65@yahoo.com

 This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

area. After that, the reality of developing social work in Tay Nguyen will be presented, following by an discussion on obstacles that impact the development of social work in Tay Nguyen.

A brief history of social work development in Vietnam

Before Prime Minister of Vietnam issued Decree 32/2010/QĐ-TTg approving the project of developing social work profession for period 2010-2020 (Project 32), social work had been practiced in Vietnam for decades. The history of social work practice in Vietnam before project 32 can be divided into three periods, namely French colonization, American colonization, and after Independence period.

During French colonization, the French missionaries introduced some institutional care models such as orphanage and retirement home, and established schools for disabled people such as School for the Blind in Saigon; School for the Deaf and Dumb in Lai Thieu province. During 1945-1954, French colonial government in Vietnam also fostered some models of social work education and practice such as Social Shelter, Social Worker School, Social Department. However, social work practice in Vietnam during that time was quite inclined toward charity work and strongly attached to Christian Church's activities. Besides, the ultimate purposes of social work practice in that time was to serve the ruling of French government in Vietnam, and mainly targeted French citizens and those who were close and/or supportive to the French colonization in Vietnam.

During the American colonization in the South Vietnam (1954-1975), social work practice and education were even promoted in a more professional manner. Besides the increase of charity organizations and other non-government organizations during this time, many social work schools were established and well developed, such as Caritas School of Social Work; School of Military-based social work (Trường Cán sự Quân đội); School of Youth Who Serves Community (Trường Thanh niên Phục vụ Xã hội – this school was particularly established by Buddhist Church); National School of Social Work (Trường Công tác Xã hội Quốc gia), etc. Social work training program was also deployed in Da Lat University and Van Hanh University. These schools did train hundreds of social workers. Many of social workers trained in this period later joined Viet Minh army to fight for the independence and unity of the country Vietnam, according to archives from Vietnam Military. This is an interesting difference between social work practice in Vietnam during French colonization and American colonization. Whereas social workers trained and worked in French colonization directed

their focus on charity-related work to support disadvantaged groups, social workers trained and worked in American colonization not only worked to improve the wellbeing of the disadvantaged, but also fought – in a literal meaning - for societal changes and socio-political revolution. It is quite unfortunate that we lacked literatures to explain why this interesting difference happened in a very short time (the American colonization replaced French colonization immediately in South Vietnam after French colonization was abolished), and how far the difference between social work training in French colonization and American colonization contributed to that difference in social work practices.

After gaining independence in 1945, the new Government of Vietnam gathered all their effort and resources to fight against what they identified as the three main enemies as hunger, illiteracy, and external aggressor. This period started up and set the ground for the strong development of many organizations and models which serve to mobilize social resources such as Vietnamese Woman Union, Ho Chi Minh Youth Union, and Veteran Association. For half a decade after 1975, Vietnam Government focused on tackling macro issues such as economic development, employment, and remaining consequences of war. During this period, organizations related to the United States and Western countries were prohibited to operate in Vietnam, which led to the decline of professional social work practice during this period. However, social security programs, community work and charity work were still encouraged nationwide to support disadvantaged people. These programs and activities were conducted under the close direction of the Government and Vietnam Communist Party to suit its political ideology.

Since 1986, Vietnam approved Economic Renovation and Open Policy, which allowed the operation of different types of business beside the state-owned companies, and enlarged its network of foreign affairs. This policy change not only effectively boosted economic development, but also brought about rapid and robust social changes. Within one decade after renovation, Vietnam turned from under-developed country into a fast developing country, making the living standard of its people well improved.

Besides constructive impacts, this renovation also resulted in some remarkable challenges, such as increasing gap between the rich and the poor, increasing rate of crime, and increasing vulnerability of disadvantaged people, which, in turn, increase social insecurity. In response to that challenges, 'Project 32' issued in 2010 is one of the effort from the Government to support disadvantaged people and increase social security by restoring and developing social work.

Social work development in Tay Nguyen: Social environment

A brief history of Tay Nguyen

Even though the need for social work profession in overall Vietnam is quite clear, which led to the birth of Project 32 in 2010, the need for social work profession in Tay Nguyen has been specialized by its specific social conditions. To better understand the way in which social work has been developed in Tay Nguyen, it is necessary to look back its interesting history before examining its present conditions.

Tay Nguyen used to be a self-governing land during feudal time – about 200 years ago. Covered by bazon red soil, averagely 600 meters above sea level, this 54,641km² area is perfectly suitable for industrial crops such as coffee tree, rubber tree, cashew tree, etc. Tay Nguyen also has very huge forest area with highly rich floristic composition. Mineral reserves in Tay Nguyen are also abundant and hardly exploited. Moreover, there is huge potential for tourism in Tay Nguyen thanks to its beautiful landscape and interestingly distinctive culture. In summary, this land promises a big resource of economic profits.

However, these potential profits were not noticed until French colonization, even though some Kings of Vietnam had made some effort to take control over this land since XV century. Before XV century, Tay Nguyen was completely autonomous land, home to several unconnected tribes of various ethnics. In 1471, King Le Thanh Tong conquered and re-organized them into small vassal kingdoms allegiant to Dai Viet¹, but no control from central court was set up in this land. During 1600s, Lord Nguyen Hoang sent his envoy to Tay Nguyen to establish Nguyen Dynasty's ruling power in Tay Nguyen, and the tribes easily accept Nguyen Dynasty's patronization. However, because the tribes lived scattered in high lands while Nguyen's Lords only cared about low land areas, so the ruling of Nguyen dynasty in Tay Nguyen was quite loose, yet the connection between Dai Viet and tribes in Tay Nguyen was still going on in some way. Under Tay Son dynasty, for example, many warriors from Tay Nguyen tribes joined Tay Son army. The famous elephant army of Tay Son was recruited from Tay Nguyen tribes. In 1838, King Minh Mang asked to merge Tay Nguyen into Viet Nam territory when drawing Vietnam Map named *Đại Nam nhất thống toàn đồ*².

During French colonization in XIX century, the French colonials noticed the potentials of Tay Nguyen thanks to their several explorations, investigations, and missionary works, so they forced Nguyen dynasty to hand over all administration and authority over Tay Nguyen to them. After World World II,

implementing divide-and-rule policy, French colonial government in Vietnam made Tay Nguyen a self-governing zone again, named Thuong Nam Dong Duong, to separate people living in central highland and those living in low-land areas.

When the French colonization was abolished, Ngo Dinh Diem, President of Vietnam Cong hoa Government in the South, again merged Tay Nguyen to Middle³ Vietnam. In 1976, after national reunification, the new – and also the present - Government of Vietnam re-organized and officially named this area Tay Nguyen, consist of five provinces as Dak Lak, Kon Tum, Lam Dong, Gia Lai, and Dak Nong. As an effort to unify it into Vietnam, Vietnam Government mobilized Kinh people from Northwest to migrate to Tay Nguyen, and also established some new special economic zones in Tay Nguyen.

Tay Nguyen at present: facilitating and challenging conditions for social work development

As mentioned above, the ethnic structure in Tay Nguyen is quite complex. Tay Nguyen was constituted from several ethnic groups, among which Kinh – the major ethnic group in Vietnam – accounts for about 64.7% of the whole population. The remaining 35.3% is consistent of about 44 minor ethnic groups such as Ba Na, Gia Rai, Ê đê, Cơ Ho, Mạ, Xơ Đăng, Mơ Nông... generally called Thuong people⁴ This structure was not so complex at first. During French colonization, Kinh people's immigration into Tay Nguyen was restricted, so Thuong people lived in their perfectly traditional culture and social organization. From the mid of XX century, especially after the migration in 1954⁵, more and more Kinh people moved to live in Tay Nguyen due to both free and planned migration movements, making Thuong people become minor in their own home.

According to an ethnologist Nguyen Tu Chi (2013), the implementation of ethnic policies after Vietnam gained its independence in 1975 and the migration of Kinh people to Tay Nguyen have resulted in several advantages for people of ethnic minorities. Every commune has its own primary school, some also have secondary school; every district has a secondary school, some also have high school. The chance for native children to go to school has impressively increased. In addition, more and more roads have been built, facilitating cultural and commercial exchanges within and beyond Tay Nguyen's territory, and allowing tourism to be developed in Tay Nguyen. Besides, Vietnam Government does pay attention to save a certain number of seats in Parliament and Government offices from central to local for representatives from ethnic minorities to ensure their voice in state government. Agriculture output has been sig-

nificantly increased thanks to the introduction of productive seed and modern technology.

However, what is good in the Kinh's eyes might not always so in the Thuong's eyes. Anthropologist Nguyen Tu Chi has also warned about a repressed conflict that Thuong might have with Kinh people about two decades ago. Some uprisings were actually organized in Tay Nguyen by people from ethnic minorities in recent years. The conflict is partly a result of an ill-plan for migration: the number of Kinh people moving to Tay Nguyen has being uncontrollably increased, and they occupy advantageous areas, pushing Thuong people deep into the wood. In addition, illegal exploitation of wood by Kinh people, including rare and valuable wood, has not been controlled very well, while afforestation and forest protection have not been well deployed. This results in the fact that Tay Nguyen wood resources are being exhausted, adding more fuel to the disagreement Thuong people feel towards their Kinh counterparts. Moreover, the massive migration of Kinh people into Tay Nguyen have made many ruining effects on the traditional social and religious life of Thuong people. Despite if these changes were made intentionally or unintentionally by Kinh people, these changes, together with the fact that Kinh people tend to defy traditional customs and habits of Thuong people, is another important reason for the conflict between Thuong and Kinh people in Tay Nguyen.

In summary, the robustly mechanic growth of population, poverty, and overexploitation of national resources are apparently issues in Tay Nguyen,

which, in turns, result in increasing overt and covert conflict between Kinh and Thuong people. This creates more specific requirements for social work development in Tay Nguyen than the other parts of Vietnam, as analyzed in the following part.

The need for social work profession in Tay Nguyen

Based on the annual reports of the five provinces of Tay Nguyen, as well as on our discussion with their provincial governors, it appears that Tay Nguyen specially needs social work intervention in three social issues: poverty, social security, and health care.

Tay Nguyen specifically needs social work intervention in poverty because it is one of the two poorest ares in Vietnam. Besides, Gini coefficient of Tay Nguyen has remained highest among Vietnam for decade (Vietnam Annual Statistics 2001, 2005; 2010), suggesting that more support for the poor is needed in Tay Nguyen to reduce inequality and ensure social stability. Moreover, since poverty reduction speed tends to slow down in recent years, showing that existing poverty reduction and hunger elimination policies has reached its highest capacity in Tay Nguyen, other solutions, appropriately social work intervention, need to be carried out as a supplement to existing poverty reduction policies. In addition, poverty rate among ethnic minorities is much higher than among Kinh people. Looking back to history, the connection between poverty and ethnicity is not something special, as the following illustration:

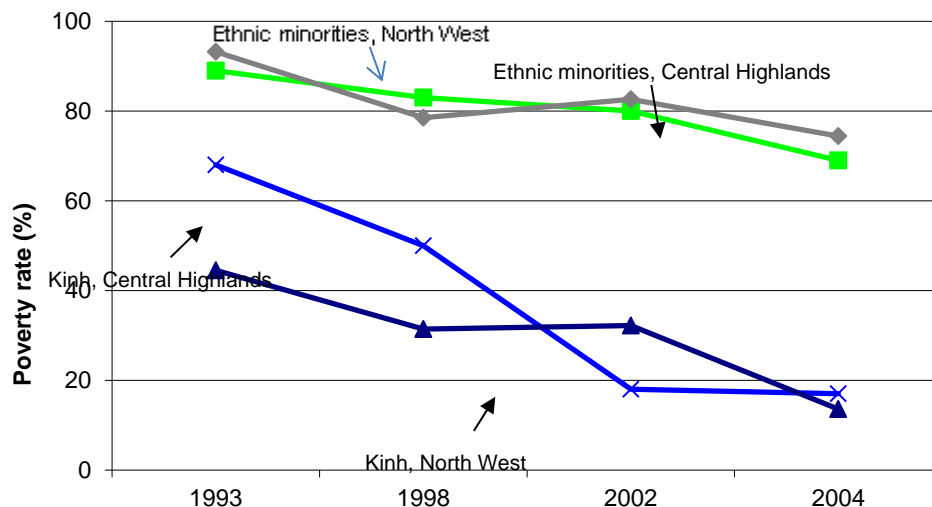


Figure 1: Poverty trends of Kinh and non-Kinh in Tay Bac (North West) and Tay Nguyen (Central Highlands). Source: Vietnam Living Standard Survey 1993 and 1998, Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey 2002 and 2004 conducted by the General Statistics Office (GSO)

According to data from Vietnam General Statistics office, poverty rate among ethnic minorities is always much higher than among Kinh people, as illustrated in figure 1 on the poverty rate among Kinh and Non-kinh in Tay Bac (north west) and Tay Nguyen (central highland). What is special about race-based poverty in Tay Nguyen in comparison to the other parts of Vietnam is that Tay Nguyen population is composed of so many different ethnical groups (44, in total), which makes it more difficult for poverty reduction solutions, which are generally one-size-fit-all style, to be effective when needs are so various. Anyway, as shown on Figure 1, the effect of poverty reduction policies on Kinh people is much greater than on non-Kinh either in Tay Nguyen (Central highlands) or Tay Bac (Northwest) – poverty rate among Kinh people went down more visibly from 1993 to 2004 than poverty rate among ethnic minorities. This fact suggests the need for social work intervention in helping the non-Kinh poor to be able to access and utilize these policies better.

Beside poverty reduction, the implementation of social security policies also needs support from social work, according to governors of Tay Nguyen provinces. In Vietnam, beneficiaries of social security policies are mainly homeless children, the old age, and the disabled. The reasons for why Tay Nguyen needs social work support in implementing social security policies is that the number of social security beneficiaries is increasing beyond the capacity that social security centers can handle. As the Director of Social Work Center of Kon Tum province explained: ‘We [Social Work Center] are now additionally functioning as a social security center, meeting the demand from 21 communes and wards in this province [Kon Tum]. For example, people over 80 year old will now be sent to our center instead of Social Security Center of Kon Tum because they are taking care of more than 100 elderlies in that Center, already over their capacity. So we are asked to receive social security beneficiary residents of this province.’

Within the realm of social security, the need for social work profession in Tay Nguyen specifically comes from three biggest difficulties. First, most staff

working on social security programs in Tay Nguyen are not trained to work with vulnerable people such as disabled or old-aged people, they lack basic knowledge as well as skills to work with their clients. Secondly, many of social security beneficiaries of Tay Nguyen lived in remote areas and member of ethnic minorities (which means they are a member of very different cultures who might see Kinh’s attempt to support as a burden rather than a help), so the implementation of social security program in Tay Nguyen is sometimes more costly than in other parts in Vietnam. Thirdly, the implementation of social security programs in Tay Nguyen is solely dependent on national budget which is inherently limited. Therefore, what Tay Nguyen need for a supportive and effective social security program is not only good policy but also a well trained staff, who has more competences than being responsible - such as cultural competence, being willing to outreach, being able to mobilize resources from community - to implement that policy. In sum, they need a well trained social worker.

With similar reasons, health care services in Tay Nguyen also need the supplement of social work practice, according to judgment of provincial governors. Beside the poor facilities of health care centers in Tay Nguyen provinces, the fact that people of ethnic minorities tend to rely on religious belief and rituals to explain and cure their illness, and also many of them do not know their rights such as subsidized health insurance. In that situation, social work practice will be of great help to bring about more opportunity and benefit in the field of health care for people living in disadvantaged conditions in Tay Nguyen.

So, according to judgement from governors of the five provinces in Tay Nguyen, the three areas that need social work practice the most are poverty, social security, and health care. It is quite interesting that when we surveyed those who are undertaking the role of social workers (and, they are actually called social workers), the areas which they believed that social work should focus on in Tay Nguyen are somewhat different from the view of governors, as shown in the following figure:

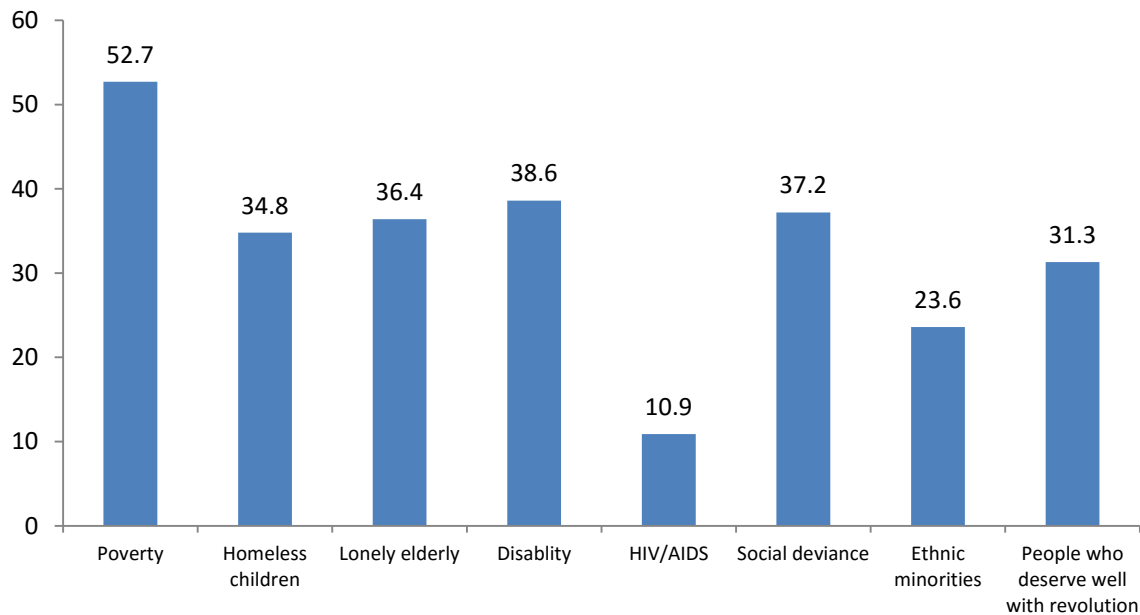


Figure 2: Fields that need social work practice in Tay Nguyen according to the view of social workers

Social work development in Tay Nguyen: some facts and figures

As reviewed in previous part, the need for professional social work in Tay Nguyen has been increasingly strong. Concurrently, Central Government has made great effort to boost the development of professional social work in Vietnam in general and Tay Nguyen in particular. Does this demand and supply meet each other in Tay Nguyen?

The answer is, generally speaking, no. Despite the fact that central government has invested hundreds of billions Vietnam Dong to develop social work through several activities such as providing financial support for social work training and education at various levels, or encouraging the development of new social work services, the current development of social work is still unable to satisfy the demand for social work intervention, particularly in Tay Nguyen.

The current state of social work practice in Tay Nguyen: somewhat simple and unstandardized

When we surveyed 370 social workers working in different agencies in Tay Nguyen, asking what they do as a social worker⁶, the answers show that two most popular professional activities that social workers in Tay Nguyen do for their clients are providing information and psychological support (62.2% and 63.2% of survey participants chose these two options respectively). Information they provide for clients includes from showing them the way to where they need to go to, to guiding them who to see, where to go, and what to do to to receive their allowance. Psychological support, as they called it, means comforting and encouraging clients when they are upset or worried. Next to providing information and psychological support, 45.9% of participants cited providing advices for clients when they have a difficulty as they common professional practice. The other common practices performed by social workers in Tay Nguyen are providing health care services, providing advices on clients' rights and obligations as prescribed by laws; and giving occupation orientation and reference.

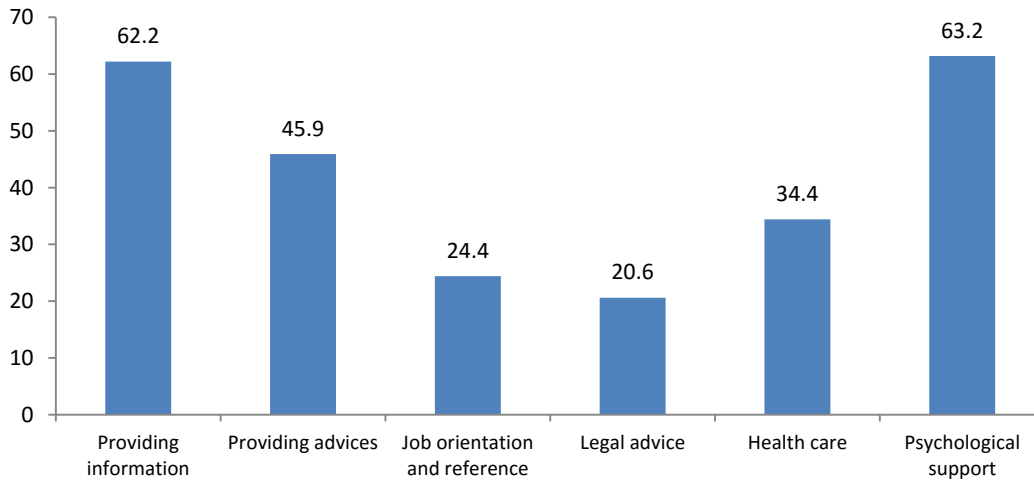


Figure 3: Activities conducted in name of social work practice

These activities, even though reflect social work roles and functions, are quite simple. The simplicity is shown not only at the limited range of activities that social workers are performing, but also at the unstandardization of the way these activities are carried out. Take psychological support for example. Because most of social workers are not trained on the skills and techniques of communication and counseling; they are also not trained on theoretical understanding of human psychology and behavior, so what is called ‘psychological support’ is simply giving some consolation and advices based on social workers’ personal values and norms, and without follow-

ing basic steps of social work practice. During our investigation period, we did observe a social worker advised a group of teenagers that homosexualities is immoral and pathological, and gay people need to be treated to give up their abnormal behaviors and be brought back to a healthy and normal life.

It is not surprising then, when we interviewed social work services users living in social work centers and social security centers in Tay Nguyen, results showed that while they highly appreciated their social workers’ effort, they also expressed that they wish their social workers improve some professional competences, as presented in following chart.

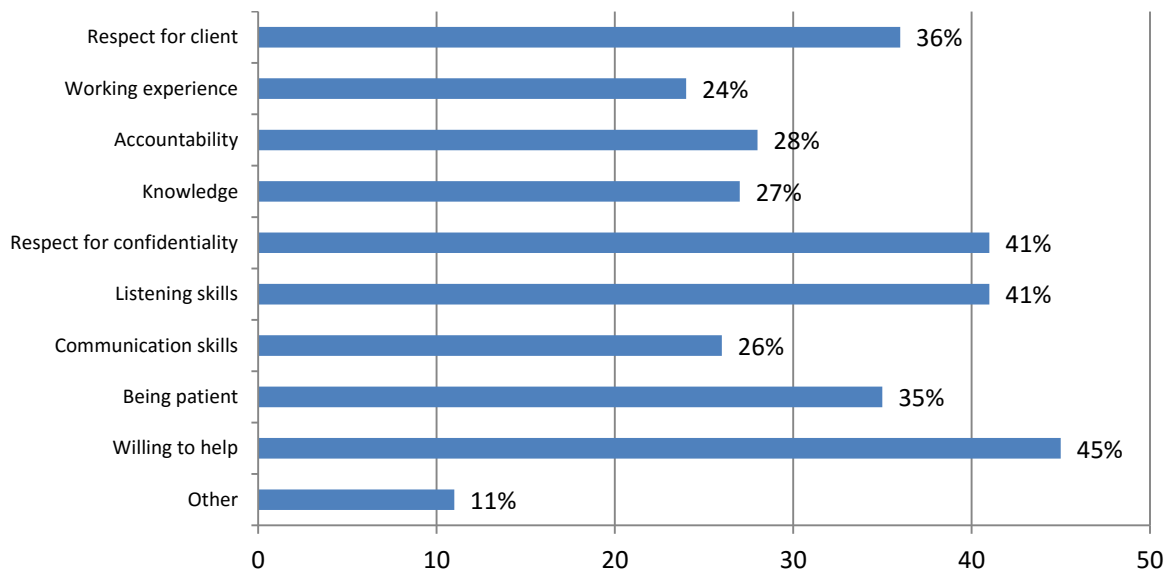


Figure 4: Competences that clients need their social workers to improve

As shown in Figure 4 above, about 45% of clients expressed that they wished their social workers were more committed to their helping profession by being more willing to help; and 41% of clients reported that they wanted social workers paid more attention to keep clients' issues confidential, and also 41% wanted their social workers had better listening skills. Respect for clients is also a manner that 36% of clients wanted their social workers to improve.

Looking at the list of competences on which social work service users want their social workers to improve, we can see that all three tools of social work practice – knowledge, skills, and professional values and ethics – were mentioned. This fact suggests that the existing social workers in Tay Nguyen need more

professional training to standardize their professional ability and ethics. Social work process and procedure are also needed to be standardized to ensure stability and quality of social work practice in social work agencies.

Differences between what social workers find important to work on and what they are actually working on

One of the notable findings of our research is that there are differences between what social workers assess as important issues in Tay Nguyen that need social work intervention and what they are actually working on, as presented in below chart.

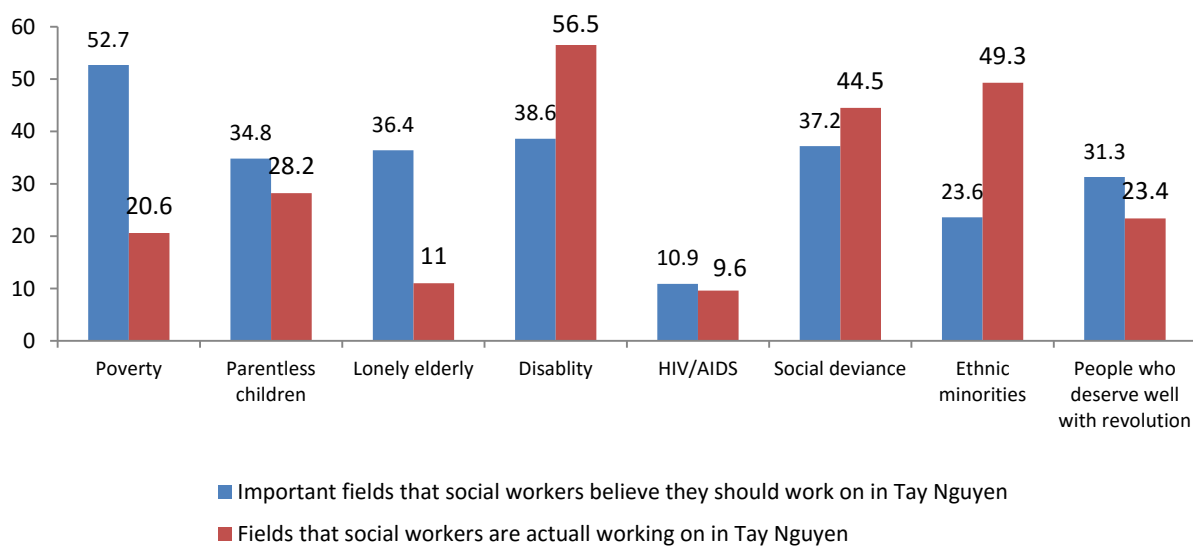


Figure 5: Current fields of social work practice in comparison with fields that social workers find important to work on in Tay Nguyen

From Figure 5, we can see that the difference between social workers' awareness of what is important for social work to focus on in Tay Nguyen and what social work practice is actually concentrating on occurs in all field of practice. However, there are two groups of practice fields where the difference is remarkable: (1) Practice fields which most social workers believe that important to work on but actually few of them are working on, including poverty and lonely elderly; and (2) Practice fields which not many social workers believe that they are important to work on but actually many of them are working on, including disability and ethnic minorities.

These differences may come from many reasons. One important reason is that social work services in Tay Nguyen now depend quite heavily on resources provided by central government, and because Vi-

etnam Government in general and Tay Nguyen government in particular pay great attention to supporting disabled people and people from ethnic minorities, so the number of social workers assigned to work with these two groups is higher than those working with other groups such as people with HIV/AIDS or lonely elderly. That means, the higher number of social workers working with certain groups reflects a top-down style assessment of what needs support from social security policies rather than a bottom-up outlook.

So, which view of point might be more proper? It is hard to say. It appears to us researchers that social work support for ethnic minorities in Tay Nguyen is of great importance - it will help bring about more equality for native people who have somewhat suffered from the massive migration of Kinh people as

reviewed in previous parts, and it also help ensure social stability in the context of increasing racial conflict. However, social workers in Tay Nguyen seem to underestimate this issue. Otherwise, the concern of Tay Nguyen social workers to lonely elderly is worthy suggestion to reconsider if the current welfare policy for the old aged does provide the sort of support that the old aged in Tay Nguyen does need.

In summary, whereas social work practice in Tay Nguyen is somewhat effective in that it does bring about better well-being for service users as what we found out in this research, there are still shortcomings that social work practice in Tay Nguyen essentially

needs to overcome in order to make its activities more professional. So, what are the obstacles for social work practice in Tay Nguyen on its way to professionalization?

Obstacles on social work development in Tay Nguyen

According to social workers working in Tay Nguyen, lack of facility is a big difficulty for them to work. 45.5% of survey participants picked this option when being asked ‘what are the obstacles for your work as social worker?’, as shown in the below chart.

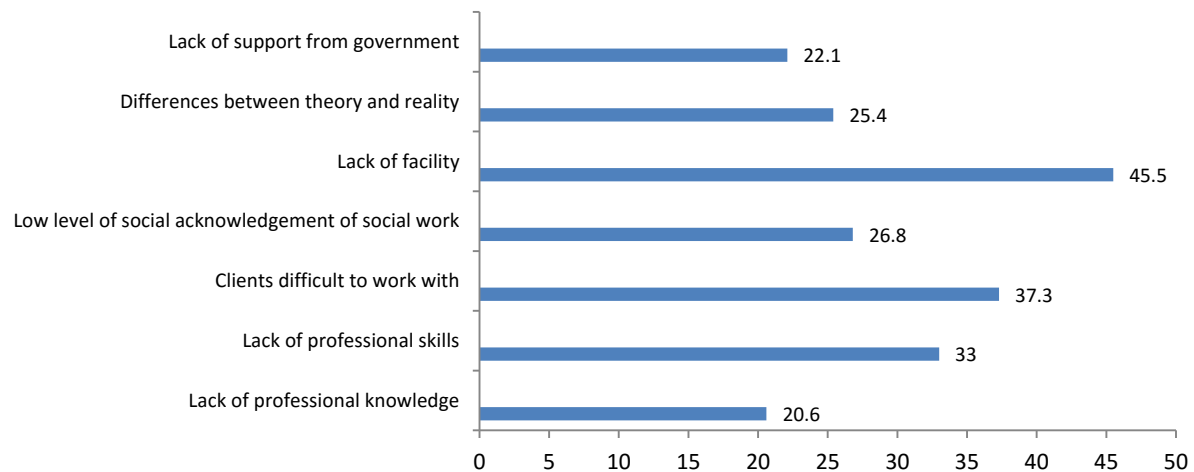


Figure 6: Difficulties for social work practice in Tay Nguyen

Facility that social workers in Tay Nguyen lacked has a wide range, from infrastructure as building and equipments to small stuff as stationaries. It is worthy to remind that our survey with social workers was conducted at social sponsor centers where provide shelter and treatment for subject of social security policy such as orphan, disabled people, and homeless elderly. During our fieldwork in Tay Nguyen, we also found that the facilities in these centers are somewhat limited. For example, many old people living in a social sponsor center for homeless elderly and disabled people told us that they felt isolated and wished to keep contact with outside society via radio and newspapers, but they were provided newspapers and allowed to gather at conference room to listen to radio only once a week. Generally, these centers provide minimum supply for basic necessities of life as food, clothes, and shelter, but not for other needs such as things for children or the old aged to entertain. Devices for the disabled to exercise to treat their illness are also very limited. This is quite different

from the social sponsor centers in provinces in lowland areas where often receives regular material support from various charity organizations. This suggests that social workers in Tay Nguyen should have paid more effort to mobilize resources from community to better meet the demand of their clients rather than relying only on supply from national budget.

Next to the lack of facility, clients are also another difficult for social workers in Tay Nguyen to work with. As explained by social workers, this difficulty comes from three main sources. Social workers were not trained to work with their specific clients, whether or not they are children, old aged, or disabled people, so it is difficult for social workers to build up a mutual understanding and cooperation with their clients. Secondly, the fact that many of their clients were in crisis at some point of time during their living at the centers also create difficulty for social workers since they do not know how to deal with crisis effectively. The common way they dealt with clients' crisis was to repress it, which was common-

ly ineffective. Last but not least, lacking communication and counseling skills also make it more difficult for social workers in Tay Nguyen during their work.

It can be seen that the reasons for why social workers in Tay Nguyen found that working with clients was a difficulty for them are actually originated from the same condition: they lack professional training. And other difficulties listed by social workers are also involved in this lack of professional training, such as lack of skills and knowledge, and inability to deal with the differences between theory and reality. This challenge was acknowledged by managers of centers as well as provincial governors in charge for social affairs in the five provinces of Tay Nguyen. However, it seems quite difficult for Tay Nguyen to overcome this challenge, mostly because of the lack of support from central government as explained by social workers; or, in a more specific explanation, because they are not allocated any budget to carry out their activities as explained by managers.

Most of our social workers do not have social work background, that's why we are trying to standardize social workers by different types of training. We have to provide social work training for those who are working as social workers at commune level, especially working skills and techniques (Director of Social Sponsor Department, Lam Dong Province). About the biggest challenge for our center... we were established as an experimental model of Project 32, however, no budget was allocated to us to operate. We strongly need to train our social workers and our collaborators, but without budget we are unable to do anything (Director of Social Sponsor Center of Kon Tum).

The above difficulties are for social workers in their daily work, as reported by social workers themselves. When we interviewed managers of social sponsor centers and governors in charge of social affairs in the five provinces of Tay Nguyen, their view are not so different from their social workers', but broader and more comprehensive. According to these directors, the obstacles for social work development can be summarized into two categories: intricate monitoring mechanism for social work development; and inadequate social awareness of social work as a profession.

Intricate monitoring mechanism was mentioned by both social workers and social work managers in Tay Nguyen in mostly three aspects. Firstly, developing social work involves many ministries and departments, so their roles and monitorship become overlapped. To put it simply, many parties try to monitor one thing, and this creates obstacles for social work development process at grassroot level.

One program [i.e. social work development] is put under directorship of different ministries and

branches – it is difficult to run it effectively. Resources need to be reassembled, and assigned to one agency in order to avoid wasting time and also human resource (Director of Social Sponsor Department, Lam Dong province)

Besides, recruitment and appointment of social workers are sometimes based on a top-down decision making rather than on actual need of grassroot agencies. Therefore, sometimes those who are working as social workers were not trained social work, and the centers have to send their staff to some short training programs, which somehow affect their budget and operation.

Social workers working here were allocated by superior committee, we [the center] receive workers allocated to us and then assign them a post suitable for their ability. We are not allowed to recruit workers... So we have to send our workers to some short training programs on social work. If we are allowed to recruit worker, we will recruit those with relevant training... I mean those trained in social work (Director, Social Work Center of Kon Tum).

Intricate management of social work development in Vietnam in general and in Tay Nguyen in particular is also reflected in insufficient budget allocation. Even though central government desires to boost social work development, but the budget allocated for social work development is quite limited due to the limitation of national budget. Therefore, not only social work centers lack money to operate, but also salary for social workers is quite low, making social work unattractive job.

Most of our staff has a salary of averagely VND 2,000,000⁷ per month, which is not enough for them to live. Besides, service users are mainly people with mental illness, paralysed elderly, severely disabled, and people with intellectual disability. The workers have to work in a harmful environment, but government does not provide any bonus for them. This occurs nationwide, not only Dak Lak (Director, Social Sponsor Center, Dak Lak province).

As for now, no budget was allocated for operation, and personnel was cut down, so how come we can open more social work center? Who will work for that center, how does that center operate? Superiors are ambitious, but we see no bright future for social work development (A governor, Gia Lai province)

Lacking money and resources in general to run social work services is difficult for anywhere, but for Tay Nguyen this obstacle is even greater, because their disadvantaged population is constituted from various ethnic groups who have their own language and culture, and live scatteredly in remote areas. Therefore, more resources are needed to hire translators and reach out.

Our social workers have to go to communes and villages to check people subject to social policies, and decide if they should be brought to center for care, or they can live in their village with support from social protection programs. Social workers also need to provide counseling for them at their villages. Our difficulty is that we lack resources.

Take propaganda program for example. Any propaganda's message needs to be translated into languages of ethnic minorities, because if we use Kinh language as in original design, in every 10 people in communes here, only one or two may understand. And when we work with community, we also need a translator. This requires resource. We are provided few dozens of millions of dong each year, which is not enough. Budget for sending our workers to go to 92 central communes is very high, let alone going to remote areas. Project 32 attaches special importance to propaganda program, but the real situation in us provinces is as what I have said (A governor, Kon Tum province)

The fact that social policies and social welfare provisions are subordinated to fiscal allowance is not something new. Lena Dominelli (1997) reminded this fact in her paper sharing the case of Britain – a developed country – with Zimbabwe and other countries in southern Africa – underdeveloped countries – when discussing about the relationship between social work and social development in the context of social change. So, lacking resources for social work development in Tay Nguyen is not an exception. The difference in the case of Tay Nguyen is that the development of professional social work is still on its very beginning. Therefore, its matter is not how to tackle with the lack of resource to *maintain* social work services, but to *develop* them. Without a better fiscal allocation plan, it is very impossible for social work to be developed in Tay Nguyen.

Beside that classic obstacle for social work development, our research also found that inadequate social awareness of social work as a profession is another big issue in Tay Nguyen. Even within government system, not every branch or department recognized social work as an official post in government system, so they are often reluctant to co-work with people who introduce themselves as social workers and/or make it complicated for social workers to prove their identification.

We used to ask for more budget, but people at the Department of Social Sponsor refused. They said that social work was not related to social sponsor policy and Project 32, so we are not entitled to budget from Project 32. Only after they were sent to a training course on social work, they acknowledged the importance of social work, and they told us to write a

proposal to develop a Social Work center for Gia Lai (Director, Social Work Center, Gia Lai province)

Same problem happens to social workers when working with communities. People tend to be more cautious with governmental staff who called themselves social workers. In general, the public tend to equate social work with charity work, and they do not trust social work's ability to deal with complicated social issues, such as poverty.

We sent social workers to work on poverty reduction at communes, but people there were so skeptical. They doubted if social workers truly knew about poverty and poverty reduction, even though these workers were trained (A governor, Gia Lai province).

It should be noted that the above obstacles for the development of professional social work in Tay Nguyen are quite similar to those in Vietnam in general. Lack of social awareness of social work as a profession is an obstacle for social work practice in all over Vietnam, not Tay Nguyen alone, which lessens social work's authority and ability in practice. What might be different in Tay Nguyen is its scope. Obstacles in Tay Nguyen might be bigger than in other parts of Vietnam due to its specific social background, especially its complicated ethnic structure. For example, lack of social awareness of social work in other parts of Vietnam can be resolved via propaganda programs, whereas the implementation of propaganda programs on social work will be so costly – as mentioned above, that they might be dismissed.

Discussion and Implication of Study

As analyzed above, the development of social work in Tay Nguyen, while follows the general path directed by Project 32 for the development of professional social work in Vietnam, has some distinctive features originated from its distinctive history and racial structure. Therefore, where as this research found that the outcomes and process of social work development in Tay Nguyen was quite similar to the outcomes and process of social work development in Vietnam in general, this research also found some questionable issues rose from Tay Nguyen's specific circumstance, as discussed belows.

Social work services are to meet human needs, but, exactly whose need?

Whereas social work is a profession to meet the need of disadvantaged people in order to release them from obstacles against their normal functioning and access to opportunities, our investigation in Tay Nguyen raised a question regarding to a debating

issue in social work profession: whose need does social work actually aim at satisfying?

This question comes from the fact that Tay Nguyen has a wide range of ethnic groups. And the ironic situation in Tay Nguyen is that native people have become minor in their own home, whereas Kinh people who are recent immigrants have become the ones who make the rule. The conflict, even though mostly overt, between Kinh people and Thuong people reflect a matter of fact that their view of life, including how to treat their natural environment, is extremely different. Therefore, what social work policies, which are developed by Kinh people, aims at tackling might not what Thuong people want to tackle.

For example, one of poverty reduction policy is to promote schooling for children of poor families, including girls. This policy, even though very helpful for Kinh families, attacks a long-lived custom of early marriage which is prevalent in many ethnic minorities, supported by a strong belief that girls should stay at home to take care of her family and do domestic work.

So, at the end, whose need social work in Tay Nguyen is attempting to serve, this requires further investigation to figure out how to reach a balance of interest between Kinh and Thuong people, in order for social work to reach its ultimate purposes as bringing out equality and better functioning for human beings.

It is necessary to develop professional social work, but who are to do that and how?

As shown in previous part, one of the obstacles for the development of professional social work in Vietnam in general and Tay Nguyen in particular is that so many parties try to take control over social work development. This results in a fact that sometimes the formulation of a policy is a result of political competition rather than for the sake of social work development. It appears to us that to develop social work profession, policies need to be synchronous and authority over social work development should be assigned to one ministry instead of various ministries.

Besides, the development requires a certain amount of money. Given the fact that money plays a decisive role in designing and implementing any social worker services, so much that Diminelli complained about modern social work practice that 'Its priority has been money, not people' (Dominelli, 1997: 31), it is not unreasonable to worry about a money-driven social work which excluded the disadvantaged people from accessing the services they need and to which they are legally entitled.

However, it should be noted that the case in Vietnam in general and in Tay Nguyen in particular

might be less serious than what is happening in UK and some countries in South Africa. Reality in Vietnam shows that community resources are quite abundant, given fact that charity organizations and movements are strongly increased in recent years. The problem in Vietnam is that we lack a mechanism to connect these resources to those who need and to distribute them in a more helpful manner rather than just giving a big amount of money to people in plight.

Implication for further study

One of the limitations of this research is that it only investigated state-owned social work agencies. Therefore, it is needed to conduct further research comparing working styles between social workers working in NGO with those working in state-controlled agencies to see how different administrative organizations affect the working attitudes and effectiveness of social work practice.

Besides, one of our remarkable findings is that there are differences between social workers and social work managers in identifying what are the most important needs that social work should concentrate on serving. Whose perspectives are more proper? We are unable to answer this question without conducting a need assessment to identify social issues that especially need social work intervention in Tay Nguyen.

Last but not least, more inquiries should be conducted to find the way to develop social work services in Tay Nguyen: how to mobilize resources other than national budget, how to design services that meet distinctive culture of Tay Nguyen so that ethnic minorities can access and accept the social work services which developed and provided by Kinh people.

Acknowledgement

This research is funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED) under grant number V12.3-2012.03

Note

1. Dai Viet: a name of Vietnam during feudal time until Gia Long – a King of Nguyen dynasty, the last feudal dynasty of Vietnam – changed it to Viet Nam in 1804.
2. Dai Nam nhat thong toan do: The general map of united Great VietNam.
3. Generally Vietnam is constituted of three parts: the north, the middle, and the south.
4. Thuong: in Vietnamese Thuong means 'High', used to call people of highland to differentiate with people from delta areas. During feudal time, people in Tay Nguyen were called 'Moi' (Moi means 'barbarous'), but during Vietnam Cong Hoa regime, the Government called them 'Thuong people' to avoid the disdainfulness of Moi.

5. Southward march, or Nam Tien in Vietnamese, referring to the migration of about one million people from the North to the South of Vietnam under the direction of Vietnam Government.
6. This is a multiple-choice question. Options provided for this question are constructed after in-depth interviews and focus discussion with social workers in Tay Nguyen.
7. VND2,000,000 = roughly USD90. So, annual income from salary of social workers in Tay Nguyen will be about USD 1080; much lower than Vietnam GNI per capital which is USD 1890 according to data from World Bank retrieved from <http://data.worldbank.org/country/vietnam>,

References

- Dolgoff, Ralph and Donald Feldstain (2013) *Understanding social welfare – a search for social justice*, Ninth Edition, Boston: Pearson.
- Dominelli, Lena (1997) ‘Social work and social development: a partnership in social changes’, *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, Vol 12, p. 29-38
- Le Thang Nghiep (2006) *Qua trình phát triển kinh tế Việt Nam*, Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Kỹ thuật
- General Statistics Office of Vietnam, Annual Report, 1998, 2000, 2005, 2008
- Morales, Armando, B. Sheafor, M. Scott (2007) *Social work – a profession of many faces*, 11st edition, Boston: Pearsons
- Nguyen Tu Chi (2013) *Van hoa toc nguoi Viet Nam*, Hanoi: NXB Thoi dai
- Nguyễn Thị Thu Hà (2011). Chuyên nghiệp hóa CTXH tại Việt Nam, nhu cầu bức thiết. *Bản tin Nghề nghiệp & cuộc sống*, Giấy phép hoạt động 1378/GP do Bộ TT&TT cấp. Hà Nội số 22, tháng 8/2011
- Nguyễn Thị Thu Hà & Nguyễn Văn Thục (2011) ‘Các lĩnh vực hoạt động và hiệu quả bước đầu của CTXH ở Việt Nam’. *Tạp chí Giáo dục Lý luận*, số 9-2011, ISSN 0868 – 3492
- Nguyễn Thị Thu Hà (2012). ‘Một số giải pháp đổi mới CTXH Việt Nam trong điều kiện kinh tế thị trường và hội nhập quốc tế’. *Tạp chí Xã hội học*, ISSN 0866 – 7659, Viện Xã hội học – Viện Khoa học xã hội Việt Nam, số 1 (115) 2012.
- Nguyễn Thị Kim Hoa (2008), “Nhu cầu đào tạo CTXH ở Việt Nam”, Kỷ yếu Hội thảo *Nghiên cứu và đào tạo CTXH trong quá trình hội nhập và phát triển*, Hà Nội: NXB DHQGHN.
- Nguyễn Hải Hữu (2007). Định hướng phát triển CTXH như một nghề chuyên nghiệp tại Việt Nam. Kỷ yếu hội thảo “*Phát triển CTXH tại Việt Nam*”, Đà Lạt: DH Da Lat.
- Nguyễn Hải Hữu (2008), *Khung kỹ thuật phát triển nghề CTXH*, Hanoi: NXB Thống kê
- Nguyễn Thị Thái Lan (2008), *Giáo trình CTXH nhóm*, Hanoi: NXB Lao động Xã hội
- Nguyễn Thị Oanh (2000) Lịch sử phát triển và đặc điểm CTXH ở Việt Nam ngày nay. Kỷ yếu hội thảo “*Đào tạo, nghiên cứu và thực hành CTXH tại Việt Nam: hiện tại và viễn cảnh*”. TP. Hồ Chí Minh.
- Sheafor, Bradford and C. Horejsi (2008) *Techniques and guidelines for social work practice*, Eighth Edition, Boston: Pearson
- Reisch, Michael and E. Gambrill (1997) *Social work in the 21st century*, Thousand Oaks: Sage publications
- Robert Doyle (2000) CTXH: một nghề chuyên môn nhiều thử thách. Kỷ yếu hội thảo “*Đào tạo, nghiên cứu và thực hành CTXH tại Việt Nam: hiện tại và viễn cảnh*”. TP. Hồ Chí Minh: NXB DHQGTPHCM
- Phạm Xuân Nam (1997), *Đổi mới chính sách xã hội – luận cứ và giải pháp*, Hanoi: NXB CTQG
- Phạm Ngọc Thanh (2011) Những vấn đề cấp bách của lý luận quản trị CTXH. *Tạp chí Giáo dục Lý luận*, số 9-2011, ISSN 0868 – 3492
- Poppo, Philip and L. Leighninger (2001) *The policy-based profession – an introduction to social welfare policy analysis for social workers*, Second edition, Boston: Allyn and Bacon
- Trần Đình Tuấn (2010) *CTXH Lý thuyết và thực hành*. Hanoi: NXB Đại học Quốc gia
- Zastrow, Charles (2004) *Introduction to social work and social welfare: Empowering people*, Belmont: Brooks/Cole-Thompson Learning.
- Some Decrees related to the development of social work as a profession*
- Quyết định số 23/2001/QĐ-TTg ngày 26/2/2001 của Thủ tướng Chính phủ về phê duyệt chương trình hành động quốc gia vì trẻ em Việt Nam giai đoạn 2001-2010.
- Quyết định số 36/2004/QĐ-TTg 17/3/2004 của Thủ tướng Chính phủ ngày về Phê duyệt chiến lược quốc gia phòng chống lây nhiễm HIV/AIDS giai đoạn đến 2010 tầm nhìn 2020.
- Quyết định số 35/2004/QĐ-BGD&ĐT ngày 11/10/2004 của Bộ trưởng BGD&ĐT về việc ban hành chương trình khung giáo dục ĐH ngành CTXH trình độ ĐH, CĐ.
- Quyết định số 65/2005/QĐ-TTg ngày 25/3/2005 của Thủ tướng Chính phủ về việc phê duyệt đề án “chăm sóc trẻ em có hoàn cảnh đặc biệt khó khăn dựa vào cộng đồng”
- Quyết định 301/2005/QĐ-TTg ngày 21/11/2005 của Thủ tướng Chính phủ về Phê duyệt chương trình hành động quốc gia về người cao tuổi Việt Nam giai đoạn 2005-2010.
- Quyết định số 52/2006/QĐ-TTg ngày 8/3/2006 của Thủ tướng Chính phủ về phê duyệt chương trình phối hợp liên ngành phòng chống mại dâm giai đoạn 2006-2010.
- Quyết định số 239/2006/QĐ-TTg ngày 24/10/2006 của Thủ tướng Chính phủ về Phê duyệt đề án trợ giúp người tàn tật giai đoạn 2006-2010.
- Quyết định 20/2007/QĐ-TTg ngày 5/2/2007 của Thủ tướng Chính phủ về Phê duyệt chương trình mục tiêu quốc gia giảm nghèo giai đoạn 2006-2010.
- Nghị định số 67/2007/NĐ-CP ngày 13/4/2007 của Chính phủ về chính sách trợ giúp các đối tượng bảo trợ xã hội.
- Quyết định số 156/2007/QĐ-TTg ngày 25/9/2007 của Thủ tướng Chính phủ về phê duyệt Chương trình mục tiêu quốc gia phòng chống ma túy đến năm 2010.
- Nghị định số 68/2008/NĐ-CP ngày 30/5/2008 của Chính phủ về điều kiện, thủ tục thành lập, hoạt động giải thể, đối với các cơ sở bảo trợ xã hội.
- Thông tư số 10 /2010/TT-BGDĐT ngày 22/3/2010 của Bộ trưởng BGD&ĐT về chương trình khung giáo dục ĐH ngành CTXH trình độ ĐH, CĐ.
- Quyết định số 32/2010/QĐ-TTg ngày 25/3/ 2010 của Thủ tướng Chính phủ về việc phê duyệt Đề án phát triển nghề CTXH ở Việt Nam giai đoạn 2010-2020.