General Review on the State of Social Work

Consultation Report Highlights

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The *Institut du Nouveau Monde* (INM) is an independent, non-partisan organization that aims to increase citizen participation in democratic life.

The purpose of INM's initiatives is to encourage citizen participation and to contribute to the development of civic competence, the strengthening of social ties and enhancement of democratic institutions.

INM's team is driven by the belief that citizen participation reinforces democracy.

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Highlights

Between April and October 2023, the purpose of the General state of Social Work (GSSW) was to conduct a public consultation on the directions to take so that social work can fully play its role in Quebec society.

The approach included four main themes:
  - A. Social work perspective
  - B. Social work practices
  - C. The organization of social services in Quebec and public policy in the social field
  - D. Initial training, continuous learning and social work research

The consultation was designed to reach all social work stakeholders, whether these individuals were social work service users, students, practitioners, professionals supporting social work practice (teachers, researchers, etc.), interdisciplinary collaborators, representatives from institutional establishments and civil society including community organizations. In all, more than 500 people participated in the activities.

The consultation was organized based on four participatory mechanisms:

  1. A questionnaire for service users and their families (French and English versions available);
  2. A participative platform;
  3. Four thematic meetings;
  4. A call for written contributions and public hearings.

Consultation results

A. Social work perspective

Social justice, and the defense of human rights, equity and group solidarity that flow from it, are seen as cardinal values in social work. However, most of the people consulted found there was a discrepancy between the ideals embodied in these values and their day-to-day application, in the practice of social work in Quebec in a world that is constantly changing and evolving.

The main issues raised were as follows:

The hospital-centric nature of the health system is undermining the role and adequate funding of social services

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Shared observations:
- The increased emphasis on the medical field in the health and social services network is diminishing the importance and role of social work.
- Many people reported a "disengagement" of the State towards social issues and social work, especially since the reform of former Minister of Health and Social Services, Gaétan Barrette (2015).
- Most people feel there is a disproportion between State funding for the medical and curative fields and funding offered to social services and prevention.

Those consulted believe that New Public Management (NPM) and the system's hospital-centric approach are medicalizing and instrumentalizing social work, in part reflected by:
- An accounting logic in management of services: individual and group needs have to "fit into the boxes" of the services offered.
- An efficiency and performance logic, in work environments, to respond to the labour and resource shortage in relation to the growing demand for services.
- Deteriorating practice conditions and a negative impact on practitioners' ability to meet the needs of populations.

The individualization of social issues as an obstacle to collective action and to intervention on the social determinants of health

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Shared observations:	**Proposed courses of action:**
- The dominance of biomedical and "social pathology" perspectives focused on healing exclude social and holistic approaches. - Instead of being addressed using a systemic approach, social issues tend to be individualized through a "checklist" approach: the system pushes professionals to fit individuals into boxes. - Prioritizing individual intervention impedes collective action. - According to most social work stakeholders, in order to bring about social change and respond adequately	Give back a collective sense to interventions. More specifically: - Give greater importance to group and collective intervention as a complement to individual social work intervention in order to be closer to the living environments of the people we serve. - Promote and recognize the work of community organizations. - Provide better funding to community organizations so as to improve the working conditions of practitioners and allow them to develop their activities.

to social issues, collective interventions must be restored.	- Develop a cross-sectoral perspective to foster a comprehensive, population-based approach. - Rebuild the trust that has been eroded between the population and the social work field.

B. Social work practices

Here are the **shared observations** of social service users and their families with regard to social work practices:

Social work is useful and important but not well known to the population
- Many people perceive social work as being "very important", "useful" and "a valuable aid" for people in need and the most vulnerable.   - Practitioners' work should be better recognized by the population: social work practices are not well understood or valued by all.
Access to services is difficult and social worker turnover is detrimental to the quality of care provided
- Services are difficult to access, especially in the public sector: a staff or resource shortage lengthens the wait time for services and appropriate care.   - The frequent turnover in practitioners affects the quality of a person's care.
Practitioners' roles and approaches are not always well understood or communicated
- Many people feel they do not have a proper understanding of the approaches used by social work practitioners.   - According to some people, the "lack of transparency" regarding practitioners' intervention plans and approaches undermines some people's trust in social work.
Practitioners' attitude is a significant lever of trust
- Practitioners are generally courteous and adopt a non-judgmental, open-minded, active listening and caring approach.   - This attitude fosters trust in social work practitioners.

Practitioners are generally competent to meet people's needs
- In general, users recognize that social work practitioners possess a vast range of competencies, which enable them to assess the "whole picture" in order to meet individuals' different needs.   - However, the workload of public sector practitioners seems heavier than that of private sector practitioners and impacts the quality of the services received.

The following are highlights of social workers' perceptions:

Loss of professional autonomy: a perverse effect of standardizing and harmonizing practices
Shared observations: - For most social workers, the practice setting restricts their professional autonomy.   - Some practitioners say they sometimes experience some dissonance and face ethical dilemmas: relying on the fundamental values of social work to meet individual or group needs while remaining loyal to employer requirements in the health and social services network.   - For many, a feeling of "delinquency" arises from departing from the established framework to adapt services to certain needs.   - Faced with standardized practices, some migrate to independent or private practice, to regain a certain level of professional autonomy.

Collective action and local practices to provide the best possible response to emerging challenges	
Shared observations: - Faced with new social realities, emerging practices are becoming increasingly more important in providing a response to needs and reducing social inequalities. - For many stakeholders consulted, the first thing to do is to revisit the approaches on which social work is based, which have lost their essence.	**Proposed courses of action:** Among the approaches to be enhanced, those consulted put the most emphasis on: - Collective action and intervention; - Local[1] practices; - Innovative practices that foster connectivity with nature. - The contribution of experiential knowledge of service users. - First Nations and Inuit knowledge.

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[1] See Section 2.3. for more details.

New technologies: invest in them to increase access to services, but not systematically
Shared observations: - New technologies can facilitate access to services, especially for people living in remote areas or more isolated sectors, as well as people with atypical schedules.   - However, accessibility to technology is variable, and virtual exchanges do not always allow the "human side" to be enhanced, even though this is the heart of social work practice.

C. Organizing social services and public policy in the social field

Overall assessment of service organization by users and their family
67% of people somewhat or entirely disagree that the wait time for receiving a service in their area is reasonable, while 30% say they somewhat or entirely agree with this statement.   55% of people somewhat or entirely disagree with the belief that social services are adapted to the diverse needs of the population, while 42% say they somewhat or entirely agree with this statement.   - Most people say they appreciate the social services provided by community organizations and CLSCs. In the private sector, 37% of people appreciate the services offered, while 34% prefer not to comment on the subject.

Health and social service system: centralized management that undermines social work's power to act	
Shared observations: - The health and social services system appears to be "over-centralized and often alienated from" the work and needs of practitioners. For example, "administrative imperatives" and "management indicators" focused on quantitative results contradict indicators centred on population needs and long-term support, valued in social work. - According to many, social workers are currently "silenced" by programs that	**Proposed courses of action:** Reduce bureaucracy in services - Allocate more time to individual intervention and support. - Lighten and remove certain administrative tasks, especially those related to the opening, computerised assessment, closing or standardized monitoring of files. - Increase social workers' professional autonomy.

are imposed "from above" and in silos, as well as by a restrictive interpretation of the duty of loyalty to the employer. ● For many people, certain administrative tasks play a major role in the day-to-day provision of services. The technocratization of services adds to professionals' workload and reduces the time allocated for intervention and individual support. ● According to several people and especially the communities concerned, the system is not adapted to the reality of Inuit and First Nation communities. ● According to several people, social work technicians are not currently valued and recognized by the network and in society.	De-centralize system management ● Organize general and front-line services on a local scale: value proximity, locality and take "territorial dynamics" into account. ● Develop a "bottom-up" system to respond to needs. ● Develop a "shared governance"[2] system in local communities. ● Recognize the right of First Nation and Inuit communities to define their own systems, according to their needs. "Free" social services from the health sector ● Give social services their own place in health management. ● Give greater autonomy and a say to social work. Promote complementarity and collaboration between stakeholders and organizations ● Promote the recognition and inclusion of social work technicians in the professional system. ● Develop and promote collaboration between community organizations, the Quebec health and social services network and regional and local authorities.[3] ● Delegate or share certain tasks.

[2] *Collectif des partenaires en développement des communautés. Contribution des apprentissages des États généraux en développement des communautés aux États généraux du travail social*, September 2023.
[3] *Ordre des travailleurs sociaux et des thérapeutes conjugaux et familiaux du Québec. Pour un travail social plus engagé*. Submission presented in connection with the General States of Social Work, September 2023.

Public policy's essential role in addressing social issues is recognized by the social workers and users of social services consulted. Nevertheless, the social work stakeholders consulted put forward a number of limitations to public policy, as well as possible courses of action to deal with them.

Public policies are detached from local needs: need to involve communities in decision-making processes	
Shared observations: ● Most of the people consulted feel that social workers do not have a sufficiently important role in the processes of elaborating and implementing public policies. ● The gap between the work of social work stakeholders and decision-making bodies results in public policies that are "often" out of step with "what is happening in the field" and that seem "detached from real needs", particularly with regard to social inequalities, poverty, homelessness, housing and climate change. ● Policies are "increasingly imposed" without sufficient consultation with the groups concerned and are developed according to a "top down" logic. ● According to service users, the four main areas that need to be improved in Quebec are poverty and social exclusion, abuse of the elderly and the vulnerable, youth protection and support for family caregivers.	**Proposed courses of action:** Develop collective solidarity by bringing together the voices of social workers: ● Develop a "collective vehicle" to unite voices and publicly promote social work and the changes needed to ensure its full contribution to the issues and challenges facing Quebec society. ● Call for amendments to Bill 15, in particular to include a global vision of health, a decentralization and democratization of the network, and a reduction of its privatization-friendly aspects. ● Create professional associations. Bring communities closer to decision-making bodies. More specifically: ● Limit the "levels" of the public policy development process to bring needs "closer to home". ● Systematically involve First Nations and Inuit in decision-making processes.

D. Initial training, continuous learning and social work research

Role of initial training in developing professional skills and putting knowledge into practice	
Shared observations: ● The "practical" aspect of initial training, through courses, is greatly appreciated by all the groups consulted. However, several believe that initial training could be developed further, to prepare professionals sufficiently for work in the field. ● Most social work practitioners see work internships as an important part of initial training. However, internship conditions are not optimal, due to the lack of diversity on offer and the fact that students are not paid. ● The complementary nature of the more practice-focused college degree in social work and the more theoretical aspects of the bachelor's degree is highly commended.	**Proposed improvements:** ● Enhance collective action: include strategic and practical concepts to mobilize, inform and raise collective awareness of major societal issues, including the climate crisis and the socio-ecological transition. ● Emphasize practical training: provide better training and support for internship supervisors, encourage participation in internships earlier in the training curriculum and develop participatory teaching through practical training. ● Promote complementarity and enhance bridges between college and university programs. ● Decolonize practices through training: value Aboriginal knowledge and cultures, and recognize their different needs, issues and interests.
Continuous learning as a vector for professional development	
Shared observations: ● The social work stakeholders consulted expressed their desire to keep abreast of developments and to expand their knowledge. However, there are limits: ● Access to training appears to be easier for social workers who are members of the Ordre than for other practitioners. ● For most people, the time and cost of training are major obstacles.	**Proposed improvements:** ● Enhance and diversify the content of the continuous learning training offer. ● Promote participatory learning. ● Create "partnerships" with other professional orders, to promote a diversified and comprehensive offer. ● Facilitate social workers' access to training. In particular, provide staff with paid leave to participate in continuous learning activities.

● According to several people, the continuous learning courses offered lack diversity.	

Role of scientific research in enriching collective practices and collective reflections	
Shared observations: ● For most of the individuals consulted, scientific research in social work was very important for enriching intervention practices. However, there are limits: ● The lack of time allocated in the workplace, for contributing to research and for reading results, hinders the integration of knowledge for many social work practitioners. ● There is insufficient funding for researchers to fully play their role. ● Transferring knowledge, from research to practice, is not optimal. There is sometimes a gap between research and practice.	**Proposed improvements:** ● Further capitalize on research in professional settings: create spaces for "clinical discussion" and "knowledge-sharing". ● Offer more financial support to contributors, especially by facilitating access to research grants. ● Contribute to the creation of a research centre (e.g., laboratory or research centre) on digital technology and social work. ● "Decompartmentalize disciplines"[4] to create closer ties between different types of knowledge. ● Bring together continuous learning and research to facilitate the transfer of knowledge from research to practice. ● Bring science within everyone's reach by popularizing and summarizing research to make it easier to understand and integrate into practice.

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[4] *Université du Québec à Rimouski. Pour un travail social adapté aux défis du 21e siècle en termes de vivre-ensemble (décolonisation des savoirs et des pratiques) et d'urgence socioclimatique*. Contribution from the team of social work professors at UQAR, Lévis campus, 2023.

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