

Perception of the future Social Workers about environmental issues

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Abstract

Environmental issues are very important for all the people thorough the world. They impact the quality of human life. Each of us must protect the environment and must take part in preventing problems. The social workers have a great role regarding environmental issues. The paper aims to obtain opinions of students of the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Social Work branch, Bachelor degree, third academic course regarding environmental issues. The research question are : "What are the perceptions of students of the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Social Work branch, Bachelor degree, third academic course about environmental issues?" and "What are their perceptions about their contribution to environmental protection as future social workers?". It is used the focus-group method and technique of interviewing the students of Social Work branch, Bachelor degree, third academic course. In the study, we had the participation of 39 students of the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Social Work branch, and third academic course. There are given the appropriate conclusions. All the students consider very serious the issues related to the environment. They accept that environmental protection is very important. Regarding the quantity of information that the students have about environmental issues, 10 students accept that they are very informed and the rest of the respondents said that they are less informed. The students affirm that they must contribute as future social workers in the environmental protection and they list a lot of actions for solving environmental problems, including: a)recycling, b)choosing the best products for the environment, c)avoiding travelling by car, d)the use of public travel, e)saving electricity, f)becoming a member and contribution to environmental organizations, g)giving donations for environment protection. The students will contribute as future social workers for environmental protection in their city/village residence in a lot of ways, as: a)population informing, b)raising public awareness about environment keeping clean, c)organizing activities for cleaning their city/village, d)implementation of environmental protection legislation, e)participation in environmental organizations, f)organizing awareness campaigns for environmental protection, g)cooperation with competent authorities in order to reduce environmental pollution and to protect the forests. There are given, also, the appropriate suggestions.

Key-words: environmental issues, undergraduate social work students, environmental protection

Introduction

Air pollution can affect our health in many ways. Numerous scientific studies have linked air pollution to a variety of health problems including: (1) aggravation of respiratory and cardiovascular disease; (2) decreased lung function; (3) increased frequency and severity of respiratory symptoms such as difficulty breathing and coughing; (4) increased susceptibility to respiratory infections; (5) effects on the nervous system, including the brain, such as IQ loss and impacts on learning, memory, and behavior; (6) cancer; and (7) premature death (cited from: <http://www.epa.gov/airtrends/2010/report/airpollution.pdf>, pg.3).

According to WHO, "The environment is a major determinant of health, estimated to account for almost 20% of all deaths in the WHO European Region. In 1989, concerned about the growing evidence of the impact of hazardous environments on human health, WHO/Europe initiated the first ever environment and health process, towards a broad primary prevention public health approach, and to facilitate intersectoral policy-making"(cited from: <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/environment-and-health>).

According to WHO, "Environmental hazards are responsible for about a quarter of the total burden of disease worldwide, and as much as 30% in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa. As many as 13 million deaths can be prevented every year by making our environments healthier" (cited from: http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/environmental_health/en/).

Various studies and literature indicate that environmental pollution disproportionately affects minority and low-income populations (Arora and Cason, 1999; Bullard, 1990; United Church of Christ, 1987). Minority and poor communities bear the burden of environmental problems that are forced upon them by decision makers and more empowered communities that subscribe to the notion of 'not in my back yard'. According to Besthorn and Saleeby (2003), this inequality in healthy environments "results in the further marginalization of already disenfranchised people" (p. 9 (cited from: <http://cswr.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Jarvis.-Environmental-justice-and-social-work-A-call-to-expand-the-social-work-profession-to-include-environmental-justice.pdf>, pg.38).

Regardless of their area of specialization, many theorists contend that "social workers will encounter the consequences of environmental contamination in their work with clients, whatever the field of practice" (Soine, 1987, p. 44 (cited from: Muldoon A. (2006) Environmental Efforts: The Next Challenge for Social Work, [Critical Social Work, Vol. 7, No. 2](#)).

The International Federation of Social Worker's (IFSW) definition of social work adopted in 2000 is : "The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work" (cited from: <http://www.socialwelfarehistory.com/programs/social-work-a-definition-2000/>).

Health is an issue of human rights and social justice. These two central social work values frame IFSW's understanding that all people have an equal right to enjoy the social conditions that underpin human health and to access services and other resources to promote health and deal with illness. The United Nations (UN) Declaration of Human Rights identified a range of rights which are essential to health. These include rights to life, liberty and security; to participation in policy making; to education and to just and favourable conditions of work. Centrally, the UN Declaration asserts the right to 'a standard of living adequate for health and well-being of self and of family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control'(Article 25).

Social workers in all settings engage every day with children, men and women struggling to realise these basic rights to health (cited from: <http://ifsw.org/policies/health/>).

Social work in its various forms addresses the multiple, complex transactions between people and their environments. Its mission is to enable all people to develop their full potential, enrich their lives, and prevent dysfunction. Professional social work is focused on problem solving and change. As such, social workers are change agents in society and in the lives of the individuals, families and communities they serve. Social work is an interrelated system of values, theory and practice (cited from: [http://socialpolicy.ucc.ie/ifsw/Definition Of Social Work.htm](http://socialpolicy.ucc.ie/ifsw/Definition%20Of%20Social%20Work.htm)).

So, it is clear that environmental problems are associated to social worker profession. So, it is very important that social workers know these problems and, knowing them, they will be able to resolve these problems.

The main aims and objectives are:

Obtaining opinions of students of the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Social Work branche, Bachelor degree, third academic course regarding environmental issues.

Analyzing students'opinions about the importance of the environment protection.

Analyzing students'opinions about their role regarding environmental problems prevention and environmental protection.

Analyzing students'opinions about their contribution to environmental protection as future social workers.

The research question are :

- 1."What are perceptions of students of the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Social Work branche, Bachelor degree, third academic course about environmental issues?"
- 2."What are perceptions of students of the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Social Work branche, Bachelor degree, third academic course about their contribution to environmental protection as future social workers?"

There are made a lot of studies in the world with the focus people opinions about environmental issues. For example, the study conducted with 500 students of Sekondi-Takoradi Metropolitan Authority (S.T.M.A) Senior High Schools by Bonney E.A., Wayoe B., Anumel E., Andoh S.A. (2013). The results of this study indicated that the students think they have role to play part in protecting the environment. They also say they can take steps not to damage it and even want to

preserve it for future generation. The major findings of the study were that most boys and girls in this study strongly agreed that learning about the environmental challenge issues would prepare them for the future and that people should care more about the protection of the environment. They also agreed that something can be done to curtail the drastic alteration of the environment. Both boys and girls agreed that science and technology can solve environmental problems (Bonney E.A., Wayoe B., Anumel E., Andoh S.A. (2013) Perceptions of Students on Environmental Challenge Issues, Journal of Environment and Earth Science, Vol. 3, No.5, pg.43-47).

Another study is conducted from the Special EUROBAROMETER 295 (2008). European citizens attach great value to the environment and are increasingly aware of the role that the environment plays in their lives. Most Europeans have environmentally friendly attitudes and they are aware of their role as individuals in protecting their environment... however, although Europeans are aware of the need to protect the environment, their green attitudes do not always translate into environmentally friendly behaviour and concrete actions. A substantial share of Europeans say that they do not feel informed about environmental issues (42%). Nonetheless, the majority feels fairly well (50%) or very well informed (5%) (Special EUROBAROMETER 295/Wave 68.2- TNS Opinions & Social (2008) Attitudes of European citizens towards the environment, Special EUROBAROMETER 295, pg.74-75).

It can be cited the research that was commissioned by SC Johnson and executed within the GfK Roper Consulting Green Gauge® US survey. The survey was fielded online among 2,000 adults age 18+ in the contiguous United States between June 9 and July 5, 2011. According to the study, "One challenge over the past 20 years for businesses, governments, and non-profits has been influencing Americans to make lifestyle changes that have a positive environmental impact. However, behavior change is possible" (SC Johnson (2011) The Environment: Public Attitudes and Individual Behavior — A Twenty-Year Evolution, GfK).

Method

Participants

In the study, we had the participation of 39 students of the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Social Work branch, third academic course. 2 students (5,1%) are male, 37 students (94,9%) are female. In the study we had the participation of students of different ages. 6 students (15,4%) are 20 years aged, 19 students (48,7%) are 21 years aged, 11 students (28,2%) are 22 years aged, 2 students (5,1%) are 24 years aged, 1 student (2,6%) is 25 years aged. 28 students (71,8%) live in city, whereas 11 students (28,2%) live in village. The students participating in the study live in different areas of northern Albania. 5 students (12,8%) live in Shkodra district, 2 students (5,1%) live in Tirana district, 7 students (17,9%) live in Lezha district, 1 student (2,6%) lives in Malësia e Madhe district, 4 students (10,3%) live in Tropojë district, 3 students (7,7%) live Puka district, 4 students (10,3%) live in Kukës district, 3 students (7,7%) live in Laç district, 2 students (5,1%) live in Mat district, 2 students (5,1%) live in Kruja district, 2 students (5,1%) live in Mirdita district, 4 students (10,3%) live in Dibra district.

Materials

It is used the focus-group method and technique of interviewing the students of Social Work branch, Bachelor degree, third academic course. The contents of the interviews and focus-groups was based at different similar studies realized in the world (as for example: a)Bonney E.A., Wayoe B., Anumel E., Andoh S.A. (2013) Perceptions of Students on Environmental Challenge Issues, Journal of Environment and Earth Science, Vol. 3, No.5, b)Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2009) Public attitudes and behaviours towards the environment - tracker survey - A research report completed for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs by TNS, Nobel House, London, c)Mondéjar-Jiménez, J., Mondéjar-Jiménez, J.A., Vargas-Vargas, M., Gázquez-Abad, J.C. (2012) Personal Attitudes in Environmental Protection, Int. J. Environ. Res., 6(4):1039-1044, d)SC Johnson (2011) The Environment: Public Attitudes and Individual Behavior — A Twenty-Year Evolution, GfK, e)Special EUROBAROMETER 295 (2008) Attitudes of European citizens towards the environment, TNS Opinions & Social).

The contents of the interviews and focus-groups was thought in a way as to collect the opinions of these students concerning the main aims and objectives of the paper.

Procedure

The Administration of the interviewing and focus-groups was conducted during the month of May 2014. The students that participated in the study consented with pleasure to participate. It was obtained the respective permission to make this study.

Results

All the students consider very serious these issues related to the environment. The main environmental issues that the students are concerned are : water pollution, air pollution, the disasters caused by the people, the growing waste, the climate change, the agricultural pollution, the urban problems and the impact on our health of chemicals used in everyday products.

The students consider the environmental issues as a serious problem, because: a) these issues affect directly our quality of life, b) environmental pollution impairs our health, c) environmental pollution impairs, also, plants and animals, d) there is too much forest destruction, throwing garbage in inappropriate places, in lakes, etc.

According to the students, environmental issues have direct effects on these aspects: a) on our health, especially on breathing problems, on people allergies increase, b) on people quality of life, c) on air pollution, d) on individual welfare.

All the students accept that environmental protection is very important.

Regarding the quantity of information that the students have about environmental issues, 10 students accept that they are very informed and the rest of the respondents said that they are less informed.

The students affirm that they must contribute as future social workers in the environmental protection. They see their contribution as future social workers in these aspects: a) participation in information and awareness programs for the population, b) contribution to different environmental associations, c) lobby for environment protection.

According to the students, the actions for solving environmental problems, include: a) recycling, b) choosing the best products for the environment, c) avoiding travelling by car, d) the use of public travel, e) saving electricity, f) becoming a member and contribution to environmental organizations, g) giving donations for environment protection.

According to the students, the main ways to prevent environmental problems are: a) providing more information on environmental issues, b) introducing heavier fines for offenders, c) trying to ensure better enforcement of existing environmental legislation, d) Offering higher financial incentives (e.g.: tax breaks, subsidies) to industry, commerce and to citizens who protect the environment and reduce air pollution.

According to the students, the main reasons of environmental problems in our country are: a) the lack of environmental culture for some individuals, b) excessive consumption of bottled products, c) air pollution, d) throwing the waste in improper places, e) massive use of cars, f) the destruction of green spaces, g) forests burning, h) pollution from the industry.

The students will contribute as future social workers for environmental protection in their city/village residence in the following ways: a) population informing, b) raising public awareness about environment keeping clean, c) organizing activities for cleaning their city/village, d) implementation of environmental protection legislation, e) participation in environmental organizations, f) organizing a lot of campaigns in order to inform and sensitize people to environmental protection, g) cooperation with competent authorities in order to reduce environmental pollution and to protect the forests.

So, in general, the data obtained coincide with the data of other studies. Our students, just like other people in the world consider very important environment protection.

Discussion

In general, the data obtained coincide with the data of similar studies made in the world. Our students consider very important environment protection. Environment protection is very important for all of us. All the people have a great role regarding environmental issues, especially the social workers. All the students (the future social workers) consider very serious the issues related to the environment. The students consider the environmental issues as a serious problem, because: a) these issues affect directly our quality of life, b) environmental pollution impairs our health, c) environmental pollution impairs, also, plants and animals, d) there is too much forest destruction, throwing garbage in inappropriate places, in lakes, etc. All the students accept that environmental protection is very important. Regarding the quantity of information

that the students have about environmental issues, it is very important that the students must have more information about environmental issues. The students affirm that they must contribute as future social workers in the environmental protection. They see their contribution as future social workers in these aspects: a) participation in information and awareness programs for the population, b) contribution to different environmental associations, c) lobby for environment protection. The students will contribute as future social workers for environmental protection in their city/village residence in the following ways: a) population informing, b) raising public awareness about environment keeping clean, c) organizing activities for cleaning their city/village, d) implementation of environmental protection legislation, e) participation in environmental organizations, f) Organizing a lot of campaigns in order to inform and sensitize people to environmental protection, g) cooperation with competent authorities in order to reduce environmental pollution and to protect the forests.

The students of the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Social Work branch, third academic course will be the future social workers that will operate in all the North of Albania area. As it is cited above, "and in the lives of the individuals, families and communities they serve". So, the environmental issues will be in the focus of their work. So, they can contribute in diminishing environmental problems in the North of Albania area.

The students must have more information about environmental issues. This can be realized through several ways, for example : a) including more information about environmental issues in their curricula, b) including more information about the role of social workers for environmental protection.

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