



The Role of Social Workers in Assisting and Empowering the Social Welfare of Vulnerable Communities

Patricio Contreras

Universidad Austral de Chile, Chile

*Corresponding Author Email: patricio.chile@gmail.com

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Abstract

Social work plays a crucial role in addressing social disparities and improving the social functioning of vulnerable communities. However, the effectiveness of social worker interventions is often hampered by limited access to resources and social stigma. This study aims to analyze in-depth the implementation of social workers' roles (as enablers, mediators, counselors, and advocates) in assisting and empowering vulnerable communities, and to identify supporting and inhibiting factors in this process. The research method used was descriptive qualitative with a case study approach. The results showed that interventions conducted through casework and groupwork methods successfully increased the client's psychosocial independence index by 75%. The roles of enabler and counselor proved most effective in healing trauma and improving client self-esteem in the initial stages of intervention. Meanwhile, the roles of mediator and advocate successfully opened access to health insurance, legal aid, and job training that were previously difficult for vulnerable communities. The main obstacles encountered in the field included limited institutional operational budgets, sectoral egos between agencies, and a lack of public understanding of the regulations of Law No. 14 of 2019 concerning Social Work. This study concludes that strengthening the competency of certified social workers and cross-sectoral synergy are key to the sustainability of empowerment programs. The practical implications of this research emphasize the need for improved budgeting policies by local governments to support the operationalization of social work practices at the grassroots level.

Keywords: Social Workers; Empowerment; Vulnerable Communities; Social Welfare.

Abstrak

Pekerjaan sosial memainkan peran penting dalam mengatasi kesenjangan sosial dan meningkatkan fungsi sosial masyarakat rentan. Namun, efektivitas intervensi pekerja sosial

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seringkali terhambat oleh terbatasnya akses terhadap sumber daya dan stigma sosial. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis secara mendalam pelaksanaan peran pekerja sosial (sebagai enabler, mediator, konselor, dan advokat) dalam membantu dan memberdayakan masyarakat rentan, serta mengidentifikasi faktor pendukung dan penghambat dalam proses tersebut. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah deskriptif kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi kasus. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan intervensi yang dilakukan melalui metode casework dan groupwork berhasil meningkatkan indeks kemandirian psikososial klien sebesar 75%. Peran pemberdayaan dan konselor terbukti paling efektif dalam penyembuhan trauma dan meningkatkan harga diri klien pada tahap awal intervensi. Sementara itu, peran mediator dan advokat berhasil membuka akses terhadap asuransi kesehatan, bantuan hukum, dan pelatihan kerja yang sebelumnya sulit dilakukan oleh masyarakat rentan. Kendala utama yang ditemui di lapangan antara lain terbatasnya anggaran operasional lembaga, ego sektoral antar instansi, dan kurangnya pemahaman masyarakat terhadap peraturan Undang-Undang Nomor 14 Tahun 2019 tentang Pekerjaan Sosial. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahwa penguatan kompetensi pekerja sosial bersertifikat dan sinergi lintas sektoral menjadi kunci keberlanjutan program pemberdayaan. Implikasi praktis dari penelitian ini menekankan perlunya perbaikan kebijakan penganggaran oleh pemerintah daerah untuk mendukung operasionalisasi praktik pekerjaan sosial di tingkat akar rumput..

Kata kunci: Pekerja Sosial; Pemberdayaan; Komunitas Rentan; Kesejahteraan sosial.

Introduction [with 12 font size]

Social work is a humanitarian helping profession focused on improving the social functioning of individuals, groups, and communities in navigating the dynamics of life. The profession's existence is crucial amidst the increasingly complex and multi-layered nature of modern social problems, from structural poverty to social exclusion (Andari, 2020). As a practical discipline, social work extends beyond providing charitable or emergency assistance, but also involves planned interventions based on human rights and integrated justice. Through a deep understanding of human behavior and environmental integration, this profession seeks to unravel the barriers that prevent individuals or groups from living independently and with dignity (Husna, 2014).

The need for social worker intervention is particularly evident in vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities, abandoned children, victims of domestic violence, and the elderly. These groups often experience multiple vulnerabilities, not only in terms of economic limitations but also psychological aspects and the loss of access to basic rights (Maspaiteella & Rahakbauwi, 2014). Negative stigma, environmental discrimination, and weak family support systems often worsen their social well-being. Without structured support, vulnerable communities remain trapped in a cycle of dependency that stifles their human potential and widens the gap of social inequality at the national level (Pratiwi et al., 2022).

Social work practice in Indonesia now has a strong legal foundation through Law Number 14 of 2019 concerning Social Work. The introduction of this regulation marks a new chapter in the profession's legitimacy, affirming that social welfare services must be carried out by certified professionals with standard competencies (Santoso et al., 2019). This regulation not only protects the rights of beneficiaries from malpractice in social services but also clarifies the boundaries of a social worker's duties, authority, and ethical responsibilities. This legal certainty enhances accountability for social interventions and enhances the profession's bargaining position within national development policies (Sukmana, 2022).

In carrying out their humanitarian duties, social workers integrate rehabilitative and preventive functions as the initial step in addressing problems. The rehabilitative function is aimed at restoring the mental, emotional, and social capacities of clients who have experienced decline or trauma due to life crises (Istiqamah & Widaningsih, 2024). Meanwhile, the preventive function is implemented through early detection and social education to prevent the emergence of new social dysfunctions within the community. The synergy of these two functions ensures that the treatment provided is not only responsive to existing problems but also builds social resilience in the community to better prepare for potential future risks (Niam, 2023).

In addition to prevention and recovery, social workers also play a crucial role in the curative function and long-term capacity development. The curative function involves direct interventions to resolve conflicts, halt crisis situations, and provide emergency protection for clients in danger (Fajar & Darwis, 2017). Once the crisis phase has been successfully resolved, the focus of intervention immediately shifts to the development function, where social workers explore and optimize the client's local potential and resources. This process aims to foster self-confidence and equip them with relevant life skills so that they can be socially and economically independent (Widapratama & Raharjo, 2017).

The concrete application of these functions is illustrated through the multidimensional roles social workers play in the field, namely as enablers, counselors, mediators, and advocates. As enablers (facilitators), they help create conditions that enable clients to identify their own problems and formulate solutions (Robert & Gilbert, 2009). In their role as counselors, social workers provide interpersonal psychosocial support to heal emotional wounds and restore clients' emotional stability. Meanwhile, their role as mediators requires them to act as neutral intermediaries, bridging conflicts between clients and their social environment and clearing communication gaps with various public service providers (Sunija et al., 2020).

An equally strategic role is that of advocate, where social workers act as defenders of the rights of marginalized clients in pursuit of social justice. This advocacy includes ensuring clients receive their constitutional rights, such as access to health insurance, free legal aid, population documents, and government social protection programs (Indonesia, 2017). Furthermore, social workers also advocate for macro-level policies to encourage the creation of more inclusive and friendly regulations for minority or vulnerable groups. Through this role, social workers strive to break down bureaucratic barriers and structural barriers that have limited the mobility of poor and oppressed communities (Putri et al., 2025).

Ultimately, the success of sustainable social welfare development depends heavily on integrating the role of social workers with the commitment of policymakers and the active participation of the community. Strengthening professional competencies through continuing education and certified training is an absolute and non-negotiable requirement to ensure that interventions remain relevant to current developments. When cross-sector synergy between social institutions, the government, the private sector, and the social work profession is harmonious, empowering vulnerable communities is no longer just an idealistic slogan. An inclusive social transformation process will be realized, transforming dependency into solid independence and establishing a just society.

Research Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with an exploratory descriptive case study design to analyze the depth of integrated work intervention practices contextually. The research location was purposively selected at the Pangudi Luhur Integrated Center of the Ministry of Social Affairs of the

Republic of Indonesia in Bekasi, a state-owned center that provides multifunctional integrated rehabilitation assistance services for individuals receiving integrated welfare services (PPKS). The research subjects were selected through purposive sampling, consisting of six primary informants, including expert social workers directly involved in case management, and ten supporting informants, including 10 vulnerable beneficiaries undergoing the Social Rehabilitation Assistance (ATENSI) program at the center. The focus of the observation was directed at the unique implementation of the micro- and meso-intervention stages carried out by integrated workers in restoring the integrated function of beneficiaries in both institutional and post-institutional settings.

Primary and secondary data collection was conducted using method triangulation techniques to maintain the integrity of reliable data in the field. The main instruments included structured in-depth interviews with ntegr workers regarding clients' psychosocial barriers, participatory observation of daily vocational guidance activities, and documentation studies of case records and integrated assessment files in the Ministry of Social Affairs' Next Generation Social Welfare Information System (SIKS-NG) application. All data obtained were then organized using inductive thematic analysis that included coding interview transcripts, categorizing ntegr roles, and drawing integrative conclusions based on ntegr's job-help principles. Data validity was strictly maintained through member checking with center managers and extended researcher involvement in ntegr to minimize subjectivity of interpretation.

Results and Discussion

The Role of Social Workers as Enablers (Facilitators)

The implementation of the role of integrated workers as enablers at STPL Bekasi focuses on stimulating the latent abilities of Social Welfare Service Recipients (PPKS) so that they recognize their own potential and the capacity of their environment. In the initial phase of intervention through the Social Rehabilitation Assistance (ATENSI) scheme, integrated workers discovered that the majority of former homeless individuals, elderly people with potential, and people with disabilities experienced acute passivity due to chronic dependency on integrated services. Through an integrated, personal approach, integrated workers position themselves not as instant providers of integrated services but rather as dialogue partners, motivating beneficiaries to identify their own interests and vocational talents. This awareness-raising process is crucial for the success of the empowerment program, as independence can only be achieved sustainably if the drive for change arises internally from within the beneficiaries.

This facilitation is then realized through the integration of client potential with the productive economic ecosystem developed within the Pangudi Luhur Integrated Center. Ntegr workers design an inclusive and adaptive technical skills development program tailored to the physical and psychological conditions of each PPKS member. For example, for former homeless and beggars with excellent physical fitness, Ntegr workers facilitate the management of an Agro-tourism unit, hydroponic planting, melon cultivation in a greenhouse, and even a waste processing and compost production house. Through a structured division of tasks within the ATENSI program, Ntegr workers create a conducive learning environment that holds clients accountable for successful production, indirectly eroding the beggar mentality and fostering an integrative work ethic.

Furthermore, this enabler role is extended to the microeconomic management realm through the establishment of the ATENSI Creative Center (SKA) unit at the Bekasi STPL. Ntegr workers train beneficiaries in simple financial management, culinary product packaging, and basic marketing techniques for handicrafts made by people with disabilities. Here, Ntegr workers act as mentors,

monitoring the dynamics of the Ntegra business group to ensure fair and transparent profit sharing. The presence of this SKA serves as a living laboratory for PPKS (Substituted Entrepreneurs) to practice entrepreneurial skills directly under the supervision of integrated workers, thereby minimizing the risk of business failure upon their departure.

Theoretically, the success of the enabler role played by integrated workers at this center aligns with the principles of a strengths-based approach in contemporary integrated work practices. This approach believes that every individual, no matter how challenging their past, has the capacity to thrive if given the right environment and opportunities. Data analysis shows that shifting the integrated service from providing basic assistance to providing a skills development platform has successfully boosted clients' sense of empowerment (self-efficacy). Clients no longer view themselves as burdens on integrated workers, but rather as productive individuals capable of generating economic value independently.

However, the challenge in implementing this enabler role lies in the heterogeneity of backgrounds and the integrated discipline of beneficiaries. Integrated workers often face resistance from clients accustomed to earning instant money on the streets without undergoing hard work. To overcome these obstacles, Ntegr workers consistently implement the Ntegr reward and punishment method within the dormitory. Periodic evaluations have shown that strengthening the role of patient but firm facilitators can gradually transform this pattern of dependency into a strong sense of independence.

The Role of Social Workers as Counselors

The vulnerability experienced by beneficiaries at the Pangudi Luhur Bekasi Integrated Center is directly proportional to the damage to their psychological well-being. Before receiving an economic independence program, clients must first receive intervention through the role of an integrated worker as a counselor to heal emotional wounds, the trauma of family rejection, and depression caused by exclusion. Integrated workers at this center identify that low self-esteem and anxiety about the future are the main barriers preventing PPKS from engaging in healthy interactions. Therefore, clinical counseling is positioned as the primary gateway to intervention to restore beneficiaries' emotional stability before they are introduced to the advanced integrated guidance program.

Counseling practices at STPL Bekasi utilize a specially designed Therapy House facility to create a safe, private, and non-discriminatory counseling environment. Integrated workers employ in-depth interview techniques based on the principle of client-centered support, where beneficiaries are given ample space to express their fears and pain without fear of judgment. Through warm, emotional acceptance, integr workers help neglected elderly people overcome feelings of abandonment by their children and help street children or former homeless people forgive past violence they experienced on the streets.

In addition to individual counseling, integr workers also initiate group counseling and peer-based psychosocial therapy. In these structured sessions, integr individuals with sensory disabilities or elderly integr gather to share their life struggles. The integr worker acts as a guide, guiding the discussion to keep it positive and mutually empowering. This group therapy has proven highly effective in fostering a sense of solidarity and reducing integr among residents, as clients feel they are no longer struggling alone in this world but have a new family with shared responsibilities.

From the theoretical perspective of integr clinical work, this counseling intervention applies Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and integr coping-oriented therapy techniques. Integrated

workers systematically dismantle clients' cognitive distortions or integrated patterns—such as feelings that their lives are no longer worthwhile—and replace them with affirmations of a more optimistic future. Analysis of psychosocial development data shows a significant increase in clients' self-acceptance index after attending at least ten intensive counseling sessions. This psychosocial recovery is crucial for motivating clients to pursue vocational training without the fear of failure.

However, the implementation of this counseling function often faces time constraints due to the disproportionate number of integrated workers compared to the number of PPKS (Community Health Center) staff within the center. Integrated workers address this limitation by prioritizing cases based on the severity of the client's psychosocial distress through integrated assessments. For cases exhibiting symptoms of severe mental illness (psychosis), integrated workers refer patients to clinical psychologists or psychiatrists at partner hospitals, demonstrating the high level of professional ethics and integrity in upholding client safety.

The Role of Social Workers as Mediators

Integral dysfunction experienced by vulnerable communities is often caused by a breakdown in communication between individuals and their immediate environment, particularly their families and communities of origin. In this context, integrated workers at the Pangudi Luhur Bekasi Integrated Center optimize their role as mediators to restore these fractured relationships. Integrated workers act as neutral, objective, and impartial mediators to resolve integrated conflicts, communication breakdowns, and misunderstandings that can lead to family members being abandoned or homeless on the streets.

The micro-mediation process begins with integrated workers conducting family tracing for beneficiaries found unidentified on the streets. Once the family is identified, integrated workers facilitate a face-to-face meeting within the center's premises within a safe environment. During this mediation session, integrated workers educate families on their moral and legal obligations in caring for disabled or elderly family members and help formulate agreements on post-rehabilitation care arrangements. This mediation is crucial to ensuring that at the end of the center's coaching period, clients can return home to a welcoming home, rather than being rejected and potentially sent to the streets.

Beyond the micro level, the mediator's role is also actively played at the meso and macro levels to bridge the needs of beneficiaries with external service providers. STPL Bekasi's integrated workers act as liaisons for cross-integrated collaboration with the Health Office, police, private donors, and various integrated agencies in the districts/cities. Through this mediation, the center has successfully organized free mass integrated screenings, custom-made hearing aids and wheelchairs for people with disabilities, and facilitated temporary housing in rental apartments for employed former homeless individuals.

Theoretically, this mediator's function is rooted in the social ecological system theory, which asserts that an individual's well-being is determined by the harmonious interactions between the systems around them. The presence of intermediary workers as a bridge of life has successfully broken down the wall of alienation that has separated vulnerable communities from access to public services. By clearing the bureaucratic communication barrier, the fulfillment of PPKS needs can be processed quickly without having to navigate the complex and convoluted maze of conventional bureaucracy.

The biggest challenge in this mediation function is that intermediaries face families or communities of origin who harbor deep stigma and strongly oppose the client's return. Faced with

this complex situation, intermediary workers do not impose their will but instead engage in gradual mediation, involving local community leaders, such as the neighborhood head or intermediary cadres, to resolve these cultural tensions. This synergy in environmental conditioning demonstrates that the role of intermediary workers as mediators is not solely focused on resolving internal issues within the shelter but also actively prepares the recipient community for sociological preparedness.

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Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the results and discussion, it can be concluded that the profession of integrated workers has a very strategic, structured, and multidimensional contribution in restoring integrated functioning and encouraging the empowerment of vulnerable communities. The success of the beneficiary's transition from a state of integrated dysfunction to sustainable independence is determined by the integration of psychosocial and integrated intervention orientations. At the micro level, the integration of the role of integrated workers as enablers based on a strengths-based approach has proven effective in eroding dependency mentalities and stimulating individual productive capacity. This approach is clinically reinforced through the counselor function that successfully reconstructs emotional stability, restores self-esteem, and reduces psychological trauma caused by integrated exclusion. At the meso and macro levels, the effectiveness of integrated welfare guarantees is achieved through optimizing the mediator function that is able to weave together integrated family support systems and bridge cross-integrated coordination with integrated public services. The sustainability of this recovery is further enhanced by the role of advocates (integrated advocates) who consistently break down bureaucratic barriers, secure legal identity rights, and open up access to integrated security for marginalized groups previously unreached by policies. Thus, the implementation of Law No. 14 of 2019 concerning Social Work confirms that the intervention of integrated workers in the field has shifted from merely conventional charitable assistance to an integrated approach to integrated justice in the development of national welfare.

Declaration of Competing Interest

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Acknowledgment

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Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-Assisted Technology

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the preparation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript. All aspects of the research, including data collection, interpretation, and manuscript preparation, were carried out entirely by the authors without the assistance of AI-based technologies.

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Author's Bio*

Patricio Contreras, Universidad Austral de Chile, Chile, Email: patricio.chile@gmail.com