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ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN THE PROCESS OF COMMUNITY BASED CORRECTIONS IN SRI LANKA**B.G.I.M. Samarasinghe***Training Officer, Training Division, National Institute of Social Development, Sri Lanka.*

Abstract: The main objective of this study is to identify the practical application of the role of social work in the process of community-based corrections in Sri Lanka. It further aims at understanding the community correction process, its applicability and the importance of the role of social work in this process. For this study, 10 community corrections officers working in the Western Province were selected as the study sample through purposive sampling method. Key informant interviews were used for data collection and the narrative analysis method was used for data analysis. David Farabee's model of corrections and cognitive behaviour theory were used for theoretical analysis. The findings of this study show that the community corrections process involves the correction of people who have committed minor crimes and those who are

not willing to face the punishment. The roles of social work done by community corrections officers at their professional level involve improving the social well-being of the client and empowering them by being their educator, facilitator, coordinator, regulator, advocator and community animator. Finally, the study found that the knowledge and experience of community corrections officials contribute to the success of a community-based process, and that further imparting of professional knowledge in social work to the relevant professionals contributes considerably to the success of the process.

Key words: community-based corrections process, crimes, professional role, social work and Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

In any society, a variety of behaviours contrary to the social order can be seen emerging over time, and what constitutes a crime is defined differently in different social institutions. Therefore, certain behaviour that is defined as a crime in one society may not be considered a crime and may be seen as a normal behaviour in another society, e.g.: sex industry (UNAIDS, 2012, p.44).

However, if a society defines certain behaviour as a crime, then there is a penalty applicable to it. Imprisonment, fines and alternative punishment methods including community-based corrections can be mentioned as examples. In Sri Lanka, the Penal Code sets out the penalties for such offenses (Penal Code, 1970, p.281).

One such punishment is “volunteering in a part of the criminal justice system known as ‘community corrections’, or ‘community-based corrections’” (Lindsay, 2000, p.02). Community-based correctional process can be seen as a form of punishment that benefits both the punisher and the offender.

“Community Based Corrections Process in Sri Lanka was instituted as a pilot project under the Ministry of Justice in 1999. The Community Based Corrections Project which commenced on 17th February 2000 was first launched as experiment in 3 magistrate’s Courts named Hulftsdorp, Fort and Maligakandha” (Department of Community Based Corrections, 2017, p.08).

In addition to the community correctional process, social work is another professional area that is considered relevant to this process. Social work can be identified as an art, science and a profession which supports people in different levels. This profession aims to enhance the wellbeing of people. When people face life struggles and challenges, social workers support them to cope with those issues. According to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), social work is defined as follows:

“Social Work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing” (International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2014). In addition to this definition, Ronald, Malar and Laavanya (2013) explain social work as: “Social work is a field of study in social sciences. It is mainly concerned with the study of social problems and social interventions. Social work sets to study individuals, groups, communities and institutions and these remain as the academic boundary of the subject. Social work is also regarded as a practice discipline, because unlike the other social science professionals, social workers involve in direct practice and intervention in the field” (Ronald et al., 2013, p.03).

Thus, social work is not only a profession which deals with people, but also with social factors which cause problems in the society. This study discusses the importance of the role of social work in the process of community corrections in Sri Lanka. It discusses what the community correction process is, its applicability and the importance of the role of social work in this process.

METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this study is to identify the practical application of the role of social work in the process of community-based corrections in Sri Lanka. It is further aimed at understanding what the community correction process is, its applicability and the importance of the role of social work in this process.

For this study, 10 community corrections officers working in the Western Province were selected as samples through the purposive sampling method. In selecting the sample for this study, these officers were selected because they have the expertise knowledge to implement the community correction process and the authority in the community correction act. Therefore, it was clear that they were the most suitable group for the study, so the selection of the sample for this study was based on the purposive sampling method. 10 key informant interviews were used for data collection from all community corrections officers in the sample and the narrative analysis method was used for data analysis.

David Farabee's model of corrections and cognitive behaviour theory were used for theoretical analysis. According to the David Farabee's model of corrections "de-emphasize prison as a sanction for nonviolent offenses and increase the use of sanctions. Furthermore, minor parole violations... should be punished by using a graduated set of intermediate sanctions, rather than returning the offender to prison" (Farabee, 2005, p.63). When discussing the cognitive behaviour theory (CBT), it "approach asserts that emotions, thoughts, and actions are interrelated, and that if intervention is intended to yield change in behaviour, it needs to pay attention to changing people's distorted thoughts and to the feeling-thinking-acting triangle" (Baldwin and Zeira, 2017, p.08). Accordingly, using these theories, it is being considered how offenders can be reintegrated into the society through community corrections rather than being sent to prison, and the role of social work in that.

RESULTS

Community corrections process

The community corrections process is an alternative punishment system that is imposed on people when they admit to a minor offense. In this situation, persons with the following penalties for minor offenses may request a community corrections order.

1. A person sentenced to less than 2 years imprisonment
2. In the event that a person who has been fined is unable to pay the fine (the amount of the fine is not specified here)
3. In a suspended sentence (Community Correctional Officer with 05 years of professional experiences, (Field data, 2021).

In addition, at the discretion of the judge, a person may be referred for community corrections. The process of community-based corrections can be shown as this.

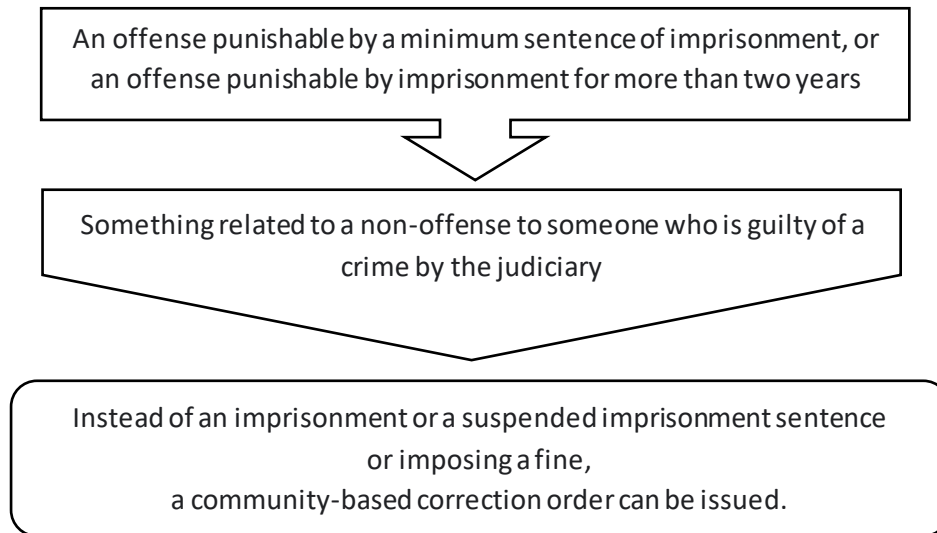


Figure 1. Community based corrections process

Source: (DCBC, 2020, p.05).

According to the study findings, the most common crimes committed by people who seek community corrections are:

- Possession of narcotics (usually heroin, cannabis and ice and *kasippu* at the village level)
- Minor thefts
- Littering on the road
- Traffic errors (Field data, 2021).

Imprisoning criminals is a significant expense for the government. Therefore, according to the David Farabee’s model of corrections “de-emphasize prison as a sanction for nonviolent offenses and increase the use of sanctions. Furthermore, minor parole violations... should be punished by using a graduated set of intermediate sanctions, rather than returning the offender to prison” (Farabee, 2005, p.63). In here, community reform can be introduced as an alternative way to reduce prison congestion as well as the cost to the government. In Prison environments, imprisoning people who are sentenced for petty crimes can make them more aware of crimes. Therefore, it can be described as an adverse consequence of imprisonment.

‘There are some criminals who are not really big criminals. But after they are sent to prison, they learn to commit more crimes than they did before. Also, they build up more relationships to commit crimes. Prison is like a school that teaches crime to people like this. Therefore, the community correction system can be described as the most effective way to save those who did minor crimes’ (Community Corrections Officer with 5 years of professional experiences, 2021).

Institutionalization for minor crimes sometimes affects not only the imprisoned person but also their relatives who did not participate in crimes. Their family members also become victims through this punishment. Therefore, a number of parties are affected by the punishment. In such cases, this system of community-based corrections can be described as a suitable method that minimizes the socio-economic problems as well as the possible harm and loss to other parties caused by punishing the wrongdoer.

The punishment should also be one that can affect the life of the person being punished but it should not harm the person who is punishing. In this aspect, community-based corrections method can be described as a successful process of giving effective punishment because it will have a significant positive effect on the life of the person being punished. Finally, instead of labeling those who commit petty crimes as criminals, the community corrections process supports socialization of those who are being punished for such crimes.

The role of social work in the process of community corrections

Social workers aim to make life better for people in crisis, who are struggling to cope, feeling alone and are unable to sort out their problems unaided (Moriarty et al., 2015, p.5). In discussing the role of the social worker, he or she has a multifaceted and large role in their professional environment.

Community Based Corrections seeks to produce a good citizen free from guilt. The community-based corrections process is an empowering process which aims to correct people who have been defined as criminals by the court and is done by keeping them in the community. It is based on the recommendations of the pre-sentencing report prepared by the community corrections officers and on considering the psycho-social issues, risk level and needs of such criminals. This process would also be the most appropriate process for some specific criminals (DCBC, 2020, p.21). Here, community correctional officers, through the Commissioner of Community Corrections, plan, implement, regulate and monitor the process of community corrections.

In planning the community corrections process, the community corrections officer identifies and assesses the criminal behaviour of the person with the support of developmental officer. The identification and assessment of the criminal behaviour of the person focuses primarily on two assessment aspects. That is,

- Assessing the recipient by the Community Corrections Officer
- Self-assessment of the offense committed by the recipient (Field Data, 2021).

Initially, the Community Based Corrections Officer will assess the possibility of the Community Correction process being carried out for the criminal. The Officer also obtains a self-assessment from him / her of the sentence given. After this stage, these officers implement the pre prepared community corrections plan.

In their professional purviews, both social worker and the community corrections officers primarily aim to improve the personal well-being of the client. Here, the social worker provides people with the resources and support they need to reach their goals. The process of community corrections basically goes beyond punishment and seeks the welfare and development of the person. In this situation, the recipient is expected to achieve a considerable psycho-social development at the end of the community corrections process.

*“Some people who come to us can’t even sign. That means there is no literacy at all. But we send them to get used to signing somehow. We practice holding the right hand. We are trying to make the punishment useful to them. We always look for their best”
(Community Based Corrections Officer with 09 years of professional experiences, 2021).*

Educator is another role of a social worker. The educator role involves giving information to clients and teaching them adaptive skills. To be an effective educator, the social worker must first be knowledgeable. Additionally, they must be a good communicator so that information is clearly conveyed and readily understood by the receiver. This would be done by community corrections officers too. In some cases, if their clients require vocational training, community corrections officers direct them to appropriate vocational training and provide them with opportunities to engage in jobs after this process.

"Sometimes these people are prone to crime because of their inability to get a job and sometimes they have financial difficulties that make it impossible for them to qualify for the job. Even if such people are punished and reintegrated into society, they make the same mistake again. Therefore, we make their qualifications through this" (Community Corrections Officer with 05 years of professional experience, 2021).

Therefore, this process becomes a successful method to control crimes in the society. Facilitation is another major role of a social worker. As a facilitator, the social worker assists his clients in achieving their goals. The social worker may become a facilitator in dealing with people facing natural or unnatural disasters. In this case, the social worker facilitates the people who are facing such situations, such as meeting the basic needs of the people as well as securing the safety of life, etc. Facilitation for its subordinates takes place during community corrections. It goes beyond the labeling of a criminal and explores how people can be reintegrated into society in a positive way.

For example, some criminals become less focused on their life goals as they are tempted to commit crimes. But the process of community correction focuses on the life goals of such people and guides them to move towards them.

The Community Corrections Officer also assists the client in finding the resources they need, and as such, he/she plays the role of Coordinator, as does the Social Worker. Here, the officer facilitates clients by integrating other professionals, resources and organizations. Furthermore, the social worker as well as the community corrections officer becomes implementers of social resources and services (gate keeping role).

Another prominent role of the social worker is that of the regulator, where the social worker provides the necessary guidance to his clients. This also gives the clients some sense of control. Here the client's unacceptable behaviour is controlled by the social worker and he / she seeks to protect the social order. This role is performed by the Community Corrections Officers as well. They correct the behaviours that contradict the social order of the people who approach them in accordance with the relevant legal system.

"Offenders come to us because they have shown criminal behaviour. In community corrections, we even change their mindset. We give them the guidance and advice they need to correct their lives. We are trying to set the stage for them not to make such mistakes again" (Community Corrections Officer with 02 years of professional experience, 202).

According to the cognitive behaviour theory (CBT), it "approach asserts that emotions, thoughts, and actions are interrelated, and that if intervention is intended to yield change in behaviour, it needs to

pay attention to changing people's distorted thoughts and to the feeling-thinking-acting triangle" (Baldwin and Zeira, 2017, p.08). Thus, individual cognition must be changed in order to rearrange the behaviour of offenders in the community corrections process. For that, community corrections officers use counselling.

Social workers who engage in empowerment focused practice seek to develop the capacity of clients to understand their environment, make choices, take responsibility for their choices and to influence their life situations through organization and advocacy. Empowerment-focused social workers also seek to gain a more equitable distribution of resources and power among different groups in society.

The community corrections seek real life change of offenders through empowerment. Empowerment in the community corrections is primarily through the social, economic and emotional aspects of the offenders. The actions taken by community corrections officers to empower their offenders can be mentioned as this.

- Eliminate criminal behaviour and minimize the background that reinforced it and provide them with the emotional empowerment they need to live successful lives.
- Skill development and vocational training e.g., directing to self-employment (producing bites, washing powder, digital boards, candles etc.). This is done in combination with the science and technology officers in the AG office.
- Provide necessary financial assistance to them. For example, the government provides Rs. 50 000.00 as a fund to start self-employment
- Empowerment to remove offenders from addiction
- Encourage the family members of the offenders by giving them the necessary empowerment. E.g.: help family members to start self-employment
- Empower the offenders to solve family problems and live happily (Field Data, 2021).

Advocacy done by the professionals in the field of community corrections is another role that is in common with social work. In the advocate role, the social worker represents his clients. Most often it involves matters relating to the legal aspects. Here, care and control is necessary. At the end of the community corrections process, this advocacy role is primarily performed by the community corrections officers.

"We will prepare a final report on behalf of the offender when the entire community correction process is completed. We will take that and represent that person in court. We request him to explain that he has successfully completed the community correction process and release the person from the relevant charge" (Community Corrections Officer with 07 years of professional experience, 2021)

Finally, the role of the community animator is another role common to and specific to both social workers as well as community corrections officers. But here the basis on which the social worker and the community corrections officer take this role is different. The social worker mobilizes people in the common interest and provides space for the community to actively use resources effectively. The community corrections officer takes this role to go beyond the dictatorship of the whole society to create social awareness in reducing crimes.

CONCLUSION

According to the study, the community-based correctional process was identified as one of the most effective punishment methods for punishing minor crimes. Just as it can reduce the cost to the government of punishment, the process can greatly achieve the goal of guiding the perpetrators to better them.

It is also clear from the discussions so far that the role of social work is essential in this process, and that the role is played by community corrections officers. The roles of social work such as improving the social well-being of the client and their empowerment, as educator, facilitator, coordinator, regulator, advocator and as community animator are all part of the community-based corrections process.

Finally, the study found that the knowledge and experience of community-based officials contribute significantly to the success of a community-based process, and that further imparting of professional knowledge of social work to the relevant professionals contributes considerably to the success of the process.

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