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DIGITAL SOCIAL WORK IN INDIA: EMERGING PRACTICES, ETHICAL CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Digital technology has significantly transformed the nature, scope and delivery of social work services across the world. In India, the increasing use of smartphones, internet-based communication, digital platforms, artificial intelligence, online counselling and electronic service-delivery systems has created new opportunities for social work practice. Digital social work has emerged as an important approach for reaching vulnerable populations, providing mental health support, facilitating community participation, promoting social inclusion and improving access to welfare services. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the adoption of digital technologies in social work education, research and professional practice. However, the integration of technology into social work also raises significant ethical, professional and practical concerns, including digital inequality, privacy violations, confidentiality, informed consent, cybersecurity, algorithmic bias and the potential weakening of direct human relationships. These concerns are particularly important in India because of its diverse social, economic, linguistic and geographical conditions.

This review paper critically examines the emerging practices of digital social work in India, identifies the major ethical challenges associated with technology-based interventions and explores the future directions of the profession. It reviews the role of digital platforms in mental health services, online counselling, child protection, women empowerment, community development, social welfare administration and social work education. It also analyses the implications of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 and the Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025 for professional social work practice. The paper argues that digital transformation should complement rather than replace the human-centred values of social work. It recommends strengthening digital competencies, developing professional ethical guidelines, ensuring data protection, addressing the digital divide and promoting inclusive technology-based interventions. Responsible integration of technology can make social work more accessible, responsive, participatory and effective in contemporary Indian society.

KEYWORDS: *Digital Social Work, Social Work Practice, Digital Technology, Online Counselling, Artificial Intelligence, Digital Inclusion, Social Welfare, Ethical Challenges, India, Data Protection.*

INTRODUCTION

Social work is a professional discipline concerned with promoting social justice, human dignity, equality, empowerment and the well-being of individuals, families, groups and communities. Traditionally, social work interventions have depended on face-to-face communication, community participation, counselling, field visits, case management and institutional support. However, rapid technological developments have transformed the methods through which social services are delivered and accessed. The increasing use of digital communication, mobile applications, online platforms, artificial intelligence and electronic databases has introduced new possibilities for professional social work practice.

Digital social work refers to the application of digital technologies and communication systems in the planning, delivery, management, monitoring and evaluation of social work services. It includes online counselling, tele-social work, digital case management, virtual community engagement, electronic documentation, online awareness programmes, digital advocacy and technology-supported welfare interventions. These practices provide opportunities to overcome geographical barriers and extend professional services to individuals and communities who may otherwise experience difficulties accessing conventional social services.

In India, digital transformation has become increasingly important because of the country's large population, regional inequalities, rural–urban differences and diverse welfare requirements. Digital platforms can connect social workers with rural communities, migrant labourers, women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. Mobile-based communication and online service delivery can facilitate information sharing, referral services, grievance redressal and access to government welfare programmes.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technologies in social work. During lockdowns, social workers, counsellors, non-governmental organisations and educational institutions increasingly depended on telephone services, video consultations, online meetings and digital communication platforms. This experience demonstrated the usefulness of technology in maintaining continuity of social services during emergencies. At the same time, it exposed limitations relating to internet connectivity, digital literacy, accessibility, confidentiality and the absence of personal interaction.

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The development of digital social work should not be understood merely as the replacement of traditional professional methods with electronic communication. Rather, it represents a transformation in the ways social workers engage with clients, assess social problems, organise interventions and promote social development. It requires professionals to understand both the opportunities and limitations of digital technologies while maintaining the fundamental values of the profession. The present paper critically reviews the emerging practices of digital social work in India, examines the ethical and professional challenges associated with digital interventions and identifies strategies for strengthening technology-enabled social work in the future.

Concept and Evolution of Digital Social Work

Digital social work is an emerging area of professional practice that integrates digital communication technologies and information systems into social service delivery. It includes the use of computers, smartphones, internet platforms, social networking applications, electronic records, online counselling systems and artificial intelligence to support professional interventions. The evolution of digital social work can be understood through three broad stages.

Traditional Social Work Practice

Traditional social work primarily relied on direct interaction between social workers and service users. Casework, group work, community organisation, social action and social welfare administration were the principal methods. Personal communication, home visits, community meetings and institutional services played an important role in identifying social problems and developing appropriate interventions.

Technology-Assisted Social Work

The development of computers, mobile phones, email and internet communication introduced technology-assisted methods into professional practice. Social workers began using electronic documentation, digital databases, online communication and information management systems. These technologies improved record maintenance, administrative efficiency and communication between institutions.

Digital and AI-Enabled Social Work

The current phase involves the integration of advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence, machine learning, data analytics, cloud-based systems, telehealth and automated communication tools. These technologies can assist professionals in identifying social needs, managing cases, analysing information and delivering remote services. Digital social work therefore represents a broader transformation in professional practice. However, technology must remain a supporting instrument, while professional judgement, empathy, confidentiality and respect for human dignity continue to guide social work interventions.

EMERGING PRACTICES OF DIGITAL SOCIAL WORK IN INDIA

Online Counselling and Tele-Social Work

Online counselling has emerged as an important component of digital social work in India. Through telephone calls, video consultations, messaging services and web-based platforms, social workers and counsellors can provide emotional support, guidance and referral services to individuals experiencing personal, family, educational and social difficulties.

Online counselling is particularly useful for individuals living in remote areas, people with mobility limitations and those who face social stigma in accessing conventional counselling services. It can also provide an alternative mode of support during emergencies and situations in which face-to-face interaction is difficult.

Tele-social work can be applied in family counselling, marital guidance, student counselling, substance-use support, elderly care and psychosocial interventions. Nevertheless, professionals must assess whether online communication is appropriate for the client's circumstances. Cases involving immediate physical danger, severe crisis or complex safeguarding concerns may require direct intervention and referral to appropriate emergency services.

Digital Mental Health Services

Mental health is one of the most important areas in which digital technologies have expanded the scope of social work practice. Digital mental health services include telephone counselling, online psychological support, teleconsultations, self-help applications, awareness campaigns and referral networks. India's National Tele Mental Health Programme, known as Tele-MANAS, represents an important government initiative in this area. Launched on 10 October 2022, the programme aims to improve access to mental health counselling and care through technology-enabled services. Its development demonstrates the potential of digital platforms to connect individuals with mental health support.

The programme's expansion, including multilingual services and additional consultation facilities, highlights the importance of technology in improving access to mental health services. Social workers can contribute through psychosocial assessment, counselling support, family engagement, community awareness, referral coordination and follow-up services. Digital mental health interventions should, however, be integrated with appropriate professional supervision, clinical referral mechanisms and emergency response systems.

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Digital Social Work in Child Protection

Digital technology has created new opportunities and challenges in child protection. Social workers can use digital communication systems to receive complaints, provide information about child rights, coordinate referrals and monitor welfare interventions.

Technology-supported child protection activities may include:

- Online reporting and referral mechanisms for child abuse and neglect.
- Digital awareness programmes on child rights and child safety.
- Online educational and psychosocial support.
- Coordination between child protection institutions.
- Electronic documentation and case monitoring.
- Awareness campaigns against child marriage, trafficking and child labour.

Digital platforms can improve communication between Child Welfare Committees, child protection units, schools, NGOs and other relevant institutions. However, digital child protection requires particularly strong safeguards because children are vulnerable to online exploitation, cyberbullying, grooming, identity theft and misuse of personal information. Social workers must ensure that children's photographs, identities, case histories and personal information are not disclosed without lawful authority and appropriate safeguards.

Digital Social Work for Women Empowerment

Digital technologies have become important instruments for promoting women's empowerment and social participation. Online awareness campaigns, mobile applications, digital literacy programmes and virtual support networks can help women access information about legal rights, education, employment, healthcare and government welfare schemes. Digital platforms can facilitate awareness of domestic violence, workplace harassment, dowry-related abuse, trafficking and other forms of gender-based discrimination. They can also connect women with counselling services, legal assistance, shelter facilities and relevant government institutions.

Social workers can use digital communication to organise women's self-help groups, provide vocational guidance, facilitate financial literacy and encourage participation in community development programmes. However, digital empowerment must address barriers such as unequal access to smartphones, limited digital literacy, language restrictions, online harassment and gender-based surveillance within households. Technology-based empowerment initiatives should therefore combine digital access with social awareness, institutional support and gender-sensitive intervention.

Digital Community Development

Community organisation is a fundamental method of social work. Digital technologies provide new opportunities for mobilising communities, facilitating participation and strengthening local development activities. Social workers can use messaging groups, video meetings, online surveys and digital platforms to communicate with community members, identify local problems and coordinate development programmes. Digital platforms can support awareness regarding sanitation, education, healthcare, environmental protection, livelihood opportunities and government welfare schemes.

In rural and tribal communities, digital communication may improve access to information about agricultural assistance, employment opportunities, education and social security programmes. Community-based digital initiatives can also encourage collective participation in local governance and development planning.

Nevertheless, digital community development should not exclude people who lack internet connectivity or technological knowledge. Offline participation and community-level assistance remain necessary to ensure that all sections of society can participate in development activities.

Digital Welfare Administration and Service Delivery

Digital technology has transformed the administration and delivery of social welfare services in India. Online applications, digital beneficiary databases, electronic documentation, direct benefit transfer mechanisms and online grievance redressal systems have changed the interaction between citizens and welfare institutions. Social workers can help beneficiaries understand eligibility conditions, complete applications, obtain necessary documents and access available welfare services. They can also identify difficulties arising from digital authentication, documentation errors, lack of awareness and limited technological access.

Digital welfare administration can improve transparency, reduce administrative delays and facilitate monitoring. However, excessive dependence on digital procedures may create exclusion when beneficiaries cannot access technology or resolve technical problems. Social workers should therefore act as facilitators between citizens and welfare institutions, ensuring that technology improves access rather than becoming an additional barrier.

Digital Social Work Education and Training

Social work education is also undergoing significant technological transformation. Online classrooms, digital libraries, virtual seminars, webinars, electronic learning materials and online research databases have expanded opportunities for academic learning. Digital tools can support the teaching of social work theory, research methods, professional ethics and social policy. Virtual simulations and case-based learning can provide students with opportunities to understand complex professional situations.

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The 2025 study by Neeraj M. S. and B. P. Nirmala on digital libraries and emerging technologies in social work education highlights the potential of artificial intelligence, virtual reality and digital learning resources in strengthening professional education. At the same time, social work education cannot depend entirely on online instruction. Fieldwork, supervised practice, community engagement and direct interaction are essential for developing professional competencies. Digital learning should complement practical training rather than replace it.

ROLE OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES IN DIGITAL SOCIAL WORK

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence is increasingly relevant to social work because of its capacity to process large amounts of information, identify patterns and assist decision-making. AI-based systems may support preliminary assessment, information management, service referrals, administrative tasks and analysis of social problems. For example, AI-supported systems may help identify patterns in child protection referrals, examine welfare service delivery and organise information relating to vulnerable populations. Chatbots may also provide basic information about available services and institutional procedures.

However, AI cannot independently replace the professional judgement, emotional understanding and ethical responsibility of social workers. Algorithmic bias, inaccurate outputs, lack of transparency and inappropriate reliance on automated recommendations can adversely affect vulnerable communities. AI should therefore be treated as a supportive tool under meaningful human supervision.

Big Data and Social Analytics

Big data and social analytics offer opportunities to understand social conditions and identify emerging community needs. Data collected through welfare programmes, public health services, education systems and community surveys can support evidence-informed planning. Social workers and researchers can use data analysis to identify patterns of poverty, unemployment, educational exclusion and unequal access to welfare services. Such analysis can help institutions develop targeted interventions and evaluate programme outcomes.

However, data collection must follow principles of necessity, accuracy, confidentiality and lawful processing. Personal information should not be collected or shared merely because technological systems make large-scale data collection possible.

Mobile Applications and Social Networking Platforms

Mobile applications and social networking platforms have become important instruments of communication and service delivery. They can facilitate awareness programmes, community mobilisation, professional networking, appointment scheduling and information dissemination. Social workers can use these platforms to connect beneficiaries with welfare institutions and provide information about available services. They can also support online campaigns relating to human rights, gender equality, environmental protection and social justice.

Nevertheless, the use of social media in professional practice requires clear boundaries between personal and professional communication, appropriate documentation and protection against unauthorised disclosure.

Virtual Reality and Digital Simulation

Virtual reality and digital simulation have potential applications in social work education and training. Simulated situations can help students understand crisis intervention, counselling approaches, child protection procedures and community engagement. These technologies can provide controlled learning environments in which students develop communication and assessment skills. However, simulations cannot fully reproduce the complexity of actual human experiences. They should be used as supplementary educational resources alongside supervised fieldwork.

Ethical Challenges in Digital Social Work

Digital social work introduces complex ethical responsibilities. The professional values of dignity, self-determination, social justice, confidentiality and accountability must be protected in technology-mediated environments.

Privacy and Confidentiality : Privacy and confidentiality are central principles of social work. During digital counselling and online case management, sensitive information may be communicated through video platforms, messaging applications, electronic records and cloud-based systems. Unauthorised access, data breaches, insecure storage and accidental disclosure can expose clients to discrimination, stigma and other forms of harm. Social work institutions must adopt secure communication systems, access controls, appropriate retention policies and staff training. Professionals should avoid sharing confidential client information through unsecured platforms or personal devices without adequate safeguards.

Informed Consent : Informed consent is essential in digital social work. Clients must understand the nature of online services, the technology being used, the limitations of confidentiality, potential risks and available alternatives. Consent should be voluntary, understandable and appropriate to the client's circumstances. Particular care is required when working with children, persons with intellectual disabilities and individuals who may have limited digital literacy. Digital consent should not be treated as a mere procedural formality. Social workers must ensure that clients genuinely understand the implications of participating in technology-based interventions.

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Digital Divide and Social Exclusion : One of the most serious challenges facing digital social work in India is the digital divide. Access to digital technology is not equally distributed across social and economic groups. People living in rural and remote areas may experience poor internet connectivity, limited access to smartphones and inadequate digital infrastructure. Women, older persons, persons with disabilities, economically disadvantaged households and certain marginalised communities may face additional barriers.

The digital divide can produce a situation in which those who most need social services are least able to access technology-based support. Digital social work must therefore follow an inclusive approach by providing alternative offline services, community-based digital assistance, accessible communication and multilingual information.

Professional Boundaries : Digital communication can create difficulties in maintaining appropriate professional boundaries. Clients may contact social workers through personal messaging applications, social media accounts or outside established service hours. Social workers must establish clear communication policies concerning availability, response times, professional accounts and emergency contacts. Personal and professional relationships should remain distinct. Digital interactions must be properly documented where required by institutional and professional standards.

Cybersecurity and Digital Risks : Cybersecurity is another important concern. Digital platforms may be exposed to hacking, phishing, malware, identity theft, impersonation and unauthorised access. A security incident involving social work records can cause significant harm because such records may contain information about domestic violence, family disputes, health conditions, financial difficulties and child protection cases. Institutions must develop cybersecurity policies, provide secure authentication, maintain appropriate backups, train employees and establish procedures for reporting and responding to data breaches.

Loss of Human Interaction : Social work is fundamentally a relationship-based profession. Empathy, trust, emotional understanding and direct communication are important elements of effective intervention. Excessive dependence on digital communication may weaken personal relationships and limit the ability of professionals to understand non-verbal expressions, family dynamics and environmental conditions. Digital services should therefore supplement, rather than completely replace, direct interaction wherever face-to-face engagement is necessary and feasible.

Legal and Policy Framework for Digital Social Work in India

The development of digital social work must be understood within the broader constitutional, legislative and policy framework of India.

Constitutional Foundations

The Constitution of India provides the normative foundation for technology-enabled social welfare. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on specified grounds. Article 21 protects life and personal liberty, which has been judicially interpreted to include the right to privacy. Article 38 directs the State to promote social welfare and reduce inequalities, while Article 46 emphasises the promotion of the educational and economic interests of weaker sections, particularly Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. These constitutional principles require digital social work initiatives to promote equality, accessibility, dignity and social inclusion.

Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023

The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 establishes a legal framework for the processing of digital personal data in India. It recognises the importance of protecting individual personal data while permitting lawful processing. The legislation is particularly relevant to social work because professional practice frequently involves collecting and processing sensitive information about individuals, families and communities.

Social work institutions should pay attention to:

- Lawful processing of personal data.
- Appropriate notice and consent requirements.
- Purpose limitation and responsible data use.
- Reasonable security safeguards.
- Compliance with applicable data retention requirements.
- Procedures for addressing data breaches.
- Protection of individuals' rights under the applicable law.

The Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025, notified in November 2025, provide further operational details. Their provisions have staggered commencement dates, and institutions must comply with the applicable requirements according to the notified implementation schedule. The Act and Rules make it important for social work organisations to develop appropriate data governance policies and ensure responsible handling of beneficiary information.

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Information Technology Act, 2000

The Information Technology Act, 2000 provides a legal framework concerning electronic records, electronic transactions and specified cyber-related offences. It is relevant to the digital environment in which social work institutions operate. Social workers and institutions should understand the legal implications of electronic communication, unauthorised access, identity-related offences and misuse of digital information.

Mental Healthcare Act, 2017

The Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 recognises the rights of persons with mental illness and provides a rights-based framework for mental healthcare services. Its emphasis on dignity, confidentiality, access to mental healthcare and informed participation is relevant to digital mental health interventions. Technology-based counselling must be delivered in a manner consistent with applicable professional and legal requirements.

Information Technology and Child Protection

Digital social work involving children must be consistent with the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 and the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, along with other applicable laws. Professionals must protect children's identities and ensure appropriate reporting, referral and safeguarding procedures. Digital communication should never compromise the privacy or safety of children.

Major Opportunities of Digital Social Work in India

Digital social work offers several opportunities for improving the accessibility, effectiveness and reach of professional services.

Wider access to services: Digital communication enables social workers to reach individuals living in remote and geographically isolated areas.

Improved service coordination: Online platforms can facilitate coordination between government departments, NGOs, healthcare institutions and community organisations.

Timely intervention: Telephone and online communication can support early identification of social problems and facilitate appropriate referrals.

Cost and time efficiency: Digital documentation and communication can reduce certain administrative burdens and travel-related expenses.

Community awareness: Social media and mobile platforms can disseminate information about rights, welfare schemes and social development programmes.

Evidence-informed practice: Digital records and appropriate data analysis can support programme monitoring, evaluation and policy planning.

Professional education: Online learning resources can expand access to academic materials, professional development and continuing education.

These opportunities demonstrate that digital technology can strengthen the effectiveness of social work when introduced with appropriate institutional support and ethical safeguards.

Major Challenges in Implementing Digital Social Work

Despite its potential, digital social work in India faces several structural and professional challenges.

1. Inadequate digital infrastructure in certain rural and remote regions restricts the availability of technology-based services.
2. Differences in digital literacy prevent many beneficiaries from using online platforms independently.
3. Linguistic diversity creates difficulties when digital services are available only in a limited number of languages.
4. Insufficient training in digital communication, cybersecurity and online counselling affects professional competence.
5. The absence of clearly articulated organisation-specific digital practice protocols may lead to inconsistent service delivery.
6. Financial constraints prevent smaller NGOs and community-based organisations from investing in secure technological infrastructure.
7. The lack of adequate research on the long-term effectiveness of digital social work interventions limits evidence-informed policy development.
8. Excessive reliance on automated systems may undermine professional judgement and reduce the human-centred character of social work.

Addressing these challenges requires cooperation among government agencies, universities, professional associations, technology developers and civil society organisations.

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Future Directions of Digital Social Work in India

The future of digital social work will depend on the ability of the profession to integrate technological innovation with ethical responsibility and social justice.

Development of Digital Competencies : Social work education should incorporate digital literacy, online communication, electronic case management, cybersecurity, data protection and responsible AI use into academic curricula. Students should receive practical training in technology-supported interventions while continuing to develop traditional casework, group work and community organisation skills.

Establishment of Professional Ethical Guidelines : There is a need for comprehensive guidelines governing digital social work practice in India. Such guidelines should address online counselling, informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, record management, professional boundaries, emergency interventions and AI-supported decision-making. Professional institutions and academic organisations should collaborate in developing standards suitable for Indian social, cultural and institutional conditions.

Strengthening Digital Inclusion : Digital inclusion should be a central objective of social work policy. Government agencies and NGOs should develop digital literacy programmes for rural communities, women, older persons, persons with disabilities and economically disadvantaged groups. Digital services should be accessible in regional languages and designed to accommodate different levels of technological knowledge.

Responsible Use of Artificial Intelligence : AI should be integrated into social work only where its application provides demonstrable benefits and does not undermine human rights. Institutions should ensure transparency, human oversight, accountability and regular evaluation of AI-based systems. Automated tools should not make final decisions concerning an individual's welfare eligibility, protection needs or access to essential services without appropriate human review.

Strengthening Data Protection and Cybersecurity : Social work organisations should establish data protection policies, secure record-management systems and procedures for responding to cybersecurity incidents. Staff members must receive regular training concerning data minimisation, access restrictions, confidentiality and secure communication.

Promotion of Research and Innovation : Universities and research institutions should encourage empirical studies on the effectiveness of digital social work in different Indian settings. Research should examine online counselling outcomes, digital inclusion, client satisfaction, professional ethics, AI applications and the experiences of vulnerable communities. Comparative research between rural and urban areas can help identify the specific conditions under which digital interventions are most effective.

Integration of Digital and Traditional Practice : The future of social work should be based on a hybrid model that combines digital services with face-to-face professional interventions. Online platforms may be appropriate for information sharing, follow-up counselling and routine communication, whereas complex family situations, child protection cases and crisis interventions may require direct engagement. A flexible approach will ensure that technology strengthens rather than weakens the relational foundation of social work.

Institutional Collaboration : Government departments, universities, NGOs, healthcare institutions and technology organisations should establish collaborative mechanisms to promote digital social work. Such partnerships can facilitate training, research, technological innovation, community awareness and the development of secure digital service-delivery systems.

CONCLUSION

Digital social work is emerging as an important dimension of professional social work practice in India. The integration of digital communication, online counselling, artificial intelligence, mobile applications and electronic service-delivery systems has created new opportunities for improving access to social welfare services and strengthening community participation. Digital technologies can support mental health interventions, child protection, women empowerment, community development, social welfare administration and professional education. Nevertheless, the transformation of social work through technology raises significant ethical and institutional concerns. Privacy violations, confidentiality risks, digital inequality, cybersecurity threats, algorithmic bias and the weakening of personal relationships require serious attention. These challenges are particularly important in India, where social and economic inequalities influence access to technological resources.

The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 and the Rules of 2025 provide an important legal context for responsible personal data processing. However, legal compliance alone is insufficient. Social work organisations must also develop professional ethical standards, strengthen institutional accountability and ensure that technology-based interventions remain sensitive to the needs of vulnerable populations. The future of digital social work should be guided by a human-centred and rights-based approach. Technology must function as an instrument of empowerment, inclusion and social justice rather than as a substitute for professional empathy and human interaction. A balanced integration of digital and traditional social work methods can contribute to a more accessible, responsive, accountable and socially inclusive welfare system in India. Ultimately, the success of digital social work

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should be measured not simply by technological advancement but by its ability to protect human dignity, reduce social inequalities and improve the quality of life of individuals, families and communities.

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