

# Comparative social work

## GULLIVER'S TRAVELS

### INTRODUCTION

'Gulliver's Travels' consists of an opportunity for students to think about social work practice in different countries. They are provided with brief details of an imaginary country and have to consider how to develop social work in that country, drawing on the experience of social work in their own country.

### Purpose

The purpose of this activity is to help students to consider how social work differs across different countries or regions, and as a result gain a greater understanding of social in their own country.

### Method

*Gulliver's travels* is best undertaken by a group of three or four students. It can also be completed successfully with a single student and practice teacher working together.

The students read the extract from the report on the imaginary country 'Gangnidborb' (about five minutes).

Independently, they complete their own recommendation sheet (ten minutes) and then jointly discuss the reasons for their recommendations (about half an hour).

In the subsequent practice tutorial, students discuss their views about how to develop social work practice - paying particular attention to the reasons for their recommendations.

In the practice tutorial, students should be encouraged to explore their views about the nature and form of social work practice in their own country. Students should identify those aspects of social work that reflect good practice and which could be used as models to develop practice in 'Gangnidborb'. However, models of practice are not necessarily directly transferable to another cultural context.

Encourage the students to consider whether their views about good practice in their own country have been influenced by considering the development of social work practice in another country.

### Variations

You may want to change the details of the example country, 'Gangnidborb', to reflect particular aspects of social work practice that you would like students to explore. There is no reason why students need to consider a country with little previous experience of social work. They consider a country with a similar history to their own, but one which exhibits a different form of social work. Likewise, real examples serve just as well as imaginary countries. For example, if you are working within the United Kingdom you may wish to use the different constituent countries, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and Wales to explore differences in practice. For example, a comparison of Northern Ireland with one of the other UK countries allows students to explore the influence of sectarianism on social work practice (see for example Cairns 1989; Smith 1996).

It is also possible to consider regional differences using a comparative approach; e.g. social work practice in two different US states, such as urban New Jersey and rural Oklahoma.

If you have access to the internet you can easily obtain basic data on all countries to include in the information you prepare for students. This will give your simulations a sense of reality.

In the activity you may wish to set limits on the resources that a student can suggest are made available for the development of social work. You could suggest that a certain budget would be provided from external sources; in the case of an Eastern European State this might be from the European Union.

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## GULLIVER'S TRAVELS Activity

### Briefing information

On behalf of the Partnership of Nations Organization for Social Work Development (PONOSWOD) you have joined three other international observers to make a visit to Gangnidorb, in order to observe the level of social work development, and to work with the Gangnidorb to advise about future needs. Some of the essential extracts from the reports your colleagues have prepared on Gangnidorb are given in the Gangnidorb Fact Sheet (below).

### Report to PONOSWOD on Gangnidorb

When you have considered the Fact Sheet below, use the following questions to help you frame your report.

We recommend that social work should be established and that it should seek to achieve the following (use bullet points):

To do this we suggest the following strategy:

It will also be necessary to identify the following resources:

## GANGNIDORB fact sheet

### *Background*

A medium-sized country - 453,679 sq.k. - located in Eastern Europe, with access to the sea. The population is 45 million people and has been declining for four years. Most of the population lives in rural communities. There are six large industrial cities with a combined population of 12 million.

### *Recently*

Since the overthrow of the communist state, there has been an attempt to establish a democratic political system and a free market economy. However, economic production has fallen by 50% in four years. The infrastructure (roads, telephones, etc.) is in a desperate state of disrepair.

### *The population*

is highly differentiated. There is a small minority, less than 5%, with access to considerable wealth, the rest of the population lives in poverty. The principal minority group is the population which lives in the west of the country - the 'westerners'.

### *By tradition*

under the communist regime there were some homes for older people, but access to these was limited to those who occupied special positions in the party hierarchy, or for particularly favoured groups, such as farm workers or members of the army. In addition, there is a well-established tradition of sanatoria for all groups in society (for example, children with behavioural difficulties might be sent to a sanatorium for a few weeks recuperation).

### *Housing*

is in severe shortage, and it takes many years' wait to be allocated a flat in an apartment block. Often, these apartments are overcrowded with several generations of the family sharing the same room. In the countryside people live in small single-storey wooden houses.

#### *Previous structures and services*

The police have dealt with all forms of crime and families have been expected to cope with their own problems.

#### *A network*

of psychiatric hospitals exists. In the past these have been used to incarcerate dissidents . . . and there a few children's houses for orphans or children abandoned by their parents. These houses typically care for 60 or more children. Adoption and fostering are unknown in any formal, legal sense.

#### *Current problems*

The country has been traumatized by involvement in a recent war, and many conscript soldiers have returned home wounded and psychologically distressed, often unable to find jobs. There are a growing range of problems; a rapid rise in drug abuse, an increase in crime (much of it controlled by Mafia-type groups), an increase in suicide and depression, and a growth in prostitution.

#### *Finances*

The government's financial resources are severely limited and tax revenues are falling. There has been 10% inflation per month for the last two years. The government is committed to the establishment of social work as a profession to mediate the hardships that the population is experiencing.

#### *Social work*

There has never been a social work profession. There are a large number of trained doctor, psychologists and psychiatrists (some of whom are keen to retrain as social workers). The previous regime took the view that there could be no social problems under a communist system and therefore no need for a profession of social work.

If you were to compile a similar Fact Sheet on your own country or state, what recommendations would you be likely to come up with? How much would these differ from the actual organization of social work in your country or state?