

# Rural fieldwork placement (RFP): an innovative and reciprocal social work fieldwork pedagogy in Africa

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# 1. Introduction

In countries where social work fieldwork placement is limited by fewer social workers and fewer organizations able to provide field placements, it is important for social work training institutions (SWEI) to embrace innovative or creative pedagogies. One strategy is to place students directly into communities. In India, this is called Rural Camp or Open Community Placement (OCP), in this article we will call all Rural Fieldwork Placement (RFP).

# 2. What is fieldwork in social work?

Also known as practicum, internship, field placement, field practice, industrial attachment, field learning or experiential learning. Fieldwork is usually done face to face, but remote or online placements are possible. Put simply, fieldwork is when a student social worker uses knowledge gained in their education or coursework for practice. Learning happens through (1) observing and doing work with qualified social workers, usually in an agency (2) observing and doing work with another professional (3) observing and doing work with the community – solving real issues (4) observing simulated activities (5) independently working on a creative social work project.

## Components of fieldwork

In professional social work, every trainee social worker needs to undergo the ritual of field placement. This is an opportunity for them to gain new skills, improve existing skills, gain confidence and learn by doing. Fieldwork has six basic components summarized as **SISSCR**, meaning:

- Student social worker
- Institution training social workers
- Supervising social worker
- Service provider - agency providing social work services
- Community – the community where field education takes place
- Regulator – this is the institution, body, committee responsible for setting guidelines, regulations and standards

Placements can be conventional, community-developmental or creative (CCdC). Developmental, community and creative placements are important in Africa because there is a shortage of social workers, and some communities have no social work agencies.

## Conventional social work placements

Conventional social work placements include placements in clinical social work, welfare and charity settings, they are usually urban focused, non-preventive and individually-focused. They can include classroom or laboratory-based simulations. They work well where there are enough experienced social workers and adequate resources to support students on placement, not usually the case in Africa.

## Community and developmental social work placements

Community and developmental social work placements involve communities, villages, remote and rural areas – these are community focused or bottom up placements. The student can be placed in an agency that has no social workers or placed within a community instead of an agency. They work very well in communities that have no access to agencies, social workers or are remote. They promote equitable development because without their involvement, the communities will never benefit from social work. The focus is to reduce poverty, empowerment and prevention of social challenges. More than 75% of people in Africa are poor, with no access to social workers, social work agencies or training institutions making these placements relevant

## Creative social work placements

Creative social work placements view social work students as contributors, innovators, creators or curators. In short, social work is viewed as an art, using individual talents to solve social challenges. This method involves working with other disciplines or communities where there are no social work supervisors or where social work is not usually there.

## Theoretical foundation of fieldwork

There are several other African theories that support fieldwork or experiential learning: pan-Africanism, Afrocentrism, developmental social work, ubuntu, indigenization and decolonisation. The African theory of education (ATE) and African philosophy of education (APE) came from the philosophy described above. APE teaches us that our communities have a role to play in education, in fact, before modern day education, learning was happening in our communities, especially experiential learning. Both ATE and APE emphasize ubuntu, that is, education is not only about the learner, but their interaction and interdependence with their family, community and society at large. Fieldwork provides an opportunity for learners to use knowledge gained in the classroom to test and improve their skills through experience. In the process, they gain more knowledge, gain confidence by working with clients and confirm their skills.

### 3. What is rural fieldwork placement?

The rural camp is one of the most awaited and intense field work activity organized by our Department of Social Work (Sanjoy, 2021). It aims for holistic professional development of the students. The rural camp provides students an exposure to rural life and enables them to plan, organize and implement relevant programmes. It is an integral part of practice learning and makes fieldwork a holistic experience. It is a social living program which gives firsthand experiences of rural cultures by exposing students to real life situations in a rural setting. The expectation of rural camp is to give participative, reflective, and analytical learning experiences for the students. Rural camp is conducted usually for 6-10 days (it may vary). Students and a part of faculty stay for that period in a rural community. Camps are expected to provide opportunities to experience rural life, analyze its dynamics, and observe the functioning of government machinery (local self-government) and understand the dynamics of the rural area and getting familiarized with *Panchayat* (local government) and self-help groups and voluntary organizations. The primary objective of the camp is to provide the student with an opportunity to acquire skills in planning, organizing, handling regulations, decision making and collectively contribute to the chosen cause in the area where the camp is held.

Rural fieldwork can be:

- i. Camps – these are placement of shorter duration usually with faculty in the community
- ii. Placements – these go for longer and usually without faculty in the community but the work involves faculty
- iii. Creative – they could be short and longer in duration but the student works with less or no involvement of faculty

### 4. Could RFP be useful in Africa?

Yes, because of these reasons:

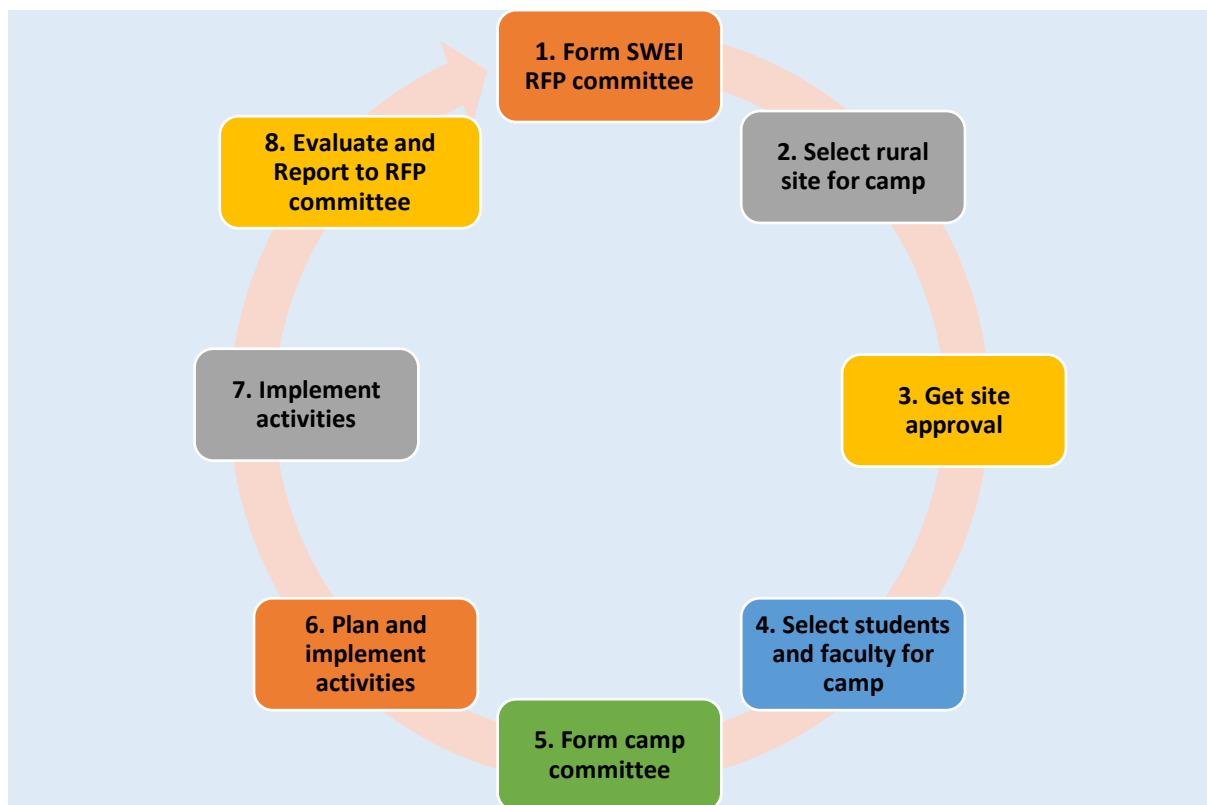
- i. We have more than 70% communities that are rural, and do not have access to social work organizations or social work services.
- ii. Social work education institutions (SWEIs) in Africa often fail to place all students because of limited social work services or because there are social workers to supervise the students.
- iii. RFP provides group placement opportunities, this ensures more people are placed at once.
- iv. RFP allows SWEIs to bring external social work field educators or supervisors.
- v. RFP allows students, most of them from rural communities, to understand first-hand how social work applies in rural communities.
- vi. There is an opportunity to combine with other training programs, such as, but not limited to development studies, community development, research, agriculture and engineering.

- vii. RFP is a reciprocal process, where communities provide an opportunity for learning while at the same time learners and faculty contribute to the community's welfare and development.
- viii. RFP could be combined with a research subject/thesis or a capstone

## 5. What process or model could be followed in Africa?

The committee could be made of one or more fieldwork educators or coordinators, one or more faculty members, and one or more students. The committee selects the site. Approval for the site comes from the rural community including village and area leaders and local government. Approval might also be required from SWEI authorities and other government departments. Students can be asked to apply to be selected for the RFP or they can be allocated by the fieldwork coordinator. The camp committee is made up of one or more faculty attending the camp, one or more students attending the camp and local community representatives. The camp committee will help plan activities with the community considering time, sustainability, resources and capacity. The camp committee will also lead evaluation and reporting.

Figure 1: ASWNet RFP model



## 6. What learning strategies could be used?

- i. Students keep a diary of their work over the period of the camp. The diary can be assessed or used to write an essay, report or reflective essay for assessment or marking
- ii. Students write daily reports or logs that will be assessed or marked
  - i. Students design a program and test it then write a report that will be assessed or marked
  - ii. Students can be observed doing work (interviewing, interacting, home visiting, participating in community activities or observing) and assessed or marked
- iii. When they return, students can be asked to design a program for the community.
- iv. Students could observe a fieldwork educator doing social work and write a descriptive report of their observations.

- v. Students aided by faculty could work with the community to develop a development plan for the village or community.
- vi. RFP could be combined with a research subject or thesis.

## 7. Some practicalities

- i. The Indian experience is that they do placements for 6 – 10 days. It might be important to consider a longer period of 2 weeks to 1 months, resources permitting. This will maximise learning at the same time making real contribution to the community.
- ii. A dedicated Rural Fieldwork Educator might be required for the SWEI. This will help maximise the contribution of RFP, sustain it and address any challenges that might arise before, during and after.
- iii. Training in ethics, ubuntu social work and rural development might be necessary for students before they do their rural placement.
- iv. Training for field educators or supervisors is recommended especially those who lack experience of working in rural communities.
- v. Camping does not need to be away from the community in a hotel or another facility, it has to be within the community. Several options exist, including camping at the local school, church, Chief's homestead or other infrastructure. Another very useful option is to ask families to host the visitors in their homes, in return, the families could be supported with food, money or other income or incentives.

## 8. Conclusion

Rural field placements provide an opportunity for true African fieldwork. They address numerous gaps, more importantly, taking social work to rural communities. Theoretically, the reciprocal nature of these placements is supported by ubuntu – education is not just about taking or doing things for others, it is about giving and learning from others. No doubt, if embraced, this creative idea, already used for several years with success in India, will improve social work training in Africa, and make it more relevant to more than 70% of African populations who do not have access to social work or social works services.

## References

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