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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

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Volume 45  
Issue 1 *Dimensions of Charity versus  
Development*

Article 9

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2018

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### Recommended Citation

García-Castilla, Francisco Javier and Vírseda, Eloy (2018) "Knowledge Transfer for Full Citizenship: The Educational Model of Innovation in Social Work," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 45: Iss. 1, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.4171>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol45/iss1/9>

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# Knowledge Transfer for Full Citizenship: The Educational Model of Innovation in Social Work

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*Knowledge is the central axis of human experience, especially in view of the current culture of information and knowledge in a highly interfaced and technical globalized world. Increased access to information and knowledge are essential prerequisites for the development of all aspects of modern societies. Teaching and research are two of the main functions of modern universities. As a result, two of their fundamental pillars are the creation and transfer of knowledge. Such transfer of knowledge, in turn, requires maintaining effective channels of communication with the public and private sectors of the labor market. Social workers are encouraged to maintain and improve such channels of communication and knowledge transfer in academia and in professional practice. Due to the peculiarities of our profession, a dual strategy for enhancing such communication is proposed. First, universities need to generate useful knowledge to eliminate or ameliorate social problems. Second, research implications for social work practice must be assessed and systematized before they can be disseminated. To this end, this article presents and describes various academic and professional experiences and proposes a model for educational transfer and innovation in social work.*

*Keywords: social work, knowledge transfer, research, practice systematization, educational model.*

## Introduction

Social work as a profession intervenes with the person by creating a helping relationship within a psychosocial perspective. Furthermore, the profession facilitates access to the social rights of citizens. It facilitates access to resources and social benefits by guaranteeing compliance with the law and international agreements. At the same time, social workers are immersed in vertiginous changes within the context of a fluid society and a globalized world. In this context, the rapid rate of change generates new citizen demands for universities and our profession. As agents for social change, social workers are inevitably involved in these social transformations (García-Castilla y Vírveda, 2016a).

It is of vital importance to study the dynamic interaction between people and their social needs. More specifically, we must link academic research initiatives to social problems and human needs in order to generate innovative solutions to benefit society and our profession.

The discipline of social work cannot be oblivious to the new demands society imposes on universities. For years the basic assumptions related to university functioning have been challenged, making a third university function necessary; that is to play a significantly active role in the process of social innovation. Knowledge transfer requires more than sharing outstanding ideas; it also requires that universities serve as guarantors of such process of innovation (Palma, 2012).

It is time for universities to seriously ponder and innovate their curricula, by adding social academic, professional and technological competencies. Universities should rethink professional practices, and re-analyze the social reality. We must engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research. Nevertheless, the research endeavor is not without challenges. López (2012) has identified three 21st century challenges impacting our profession, science and citizenship. These are: strengthening the scientific endeavor in academia to develop new intervention protocols, promoting community social work as an intervention, and taking vulnerable groups into consideration.

Knowledge and technology transfer require a permanent dialogue between practice, teaching and research, and a multidirectional network that facilitates the dynamic exchange of *avant*

*garde* information. Such network and dialogue should result in up-to-date knowledge for teachers, better training for students, and the creation of spaces for reflection on the social reality and professional practice. All of these would benefit the profession given new realities and issues. As Galindo, Sanz, and de Benito (2011, p. 116) stated, "knowledge transfer has emerged to lead the process of technology transformation, to convert the know-how, the knowledge and the skills into products and innovative services in the market."

In the present context, organizations and universities managing the transmission of knowledge must undergo significant change. It is the responsibility of the university to share knowledge with its surroundings. Sharing knowledge with the academic surroundings is the responsibility of the university. According to Galindo et al. (2011, p. 114) universities must generate, apply, use and exploit "technology and knowledge outside the academic environment through interaction with the rest of society." However, universities should not be the only players in this process. All other organizations must generate value through knowledge transfer.

This article describes the processes of knowledge transfer and innovation in social work. It presents situations born within the context of globalization and a society that is driven by information and knowledge. It also identifies issues that originate from the interaction of social work education (adaptation of curricula, academic professional and technological competencies) and university policies related to knowledge transfer, the profession and society (Arias & Aristizábal, 2011). Finally, the article proposes an educational model of knowledge transfer for innovation in social work.

## Knowledge Transfer at the University: The Concept of Knowledge Transfer

Social work should not focus only on managing or distributing resources or benefits; it also needs to contribute to the enjoyment of social rights and the formulation of public policies in a way that leads to full citizenship. As the profession works towards this ideal, it cannot be oblivious to the third role of the university. The transfer of knowledge should contribute to

improve the quality of care and the well-being of society. This can be attained by research and development-driven synergies between the university, social institutions and other agents responsible for social innovation.

What is knowledge transfer? According to Beraza and Rodríguez (2009), it is a way to create value through research efforts. It activates and strengthens the innovating ability of surrounding enterprises, therefore contributing to economic growth and to social welfare. Knowledge transfer should be a dynamic process that brings together the university and social institutions to generate knowledge through social research. Such research analyzes best practices, aimed at optimizing quality of care by social workers (social services, third sector, consultants). The main objective of knowledge transfer in social work is to improve individual care and collective welfare to enhance citizens' access to social rights (García-Castilla y Vírveda, 2016a; IFSW, 2004; López, 2012).

It would be advisable for social workers to develop a type of *social jurisprudence* to learn how to solve cases through their professional practice, generate resources for intervention and provide information that promotes research and innovation in universities. According to Zárraga (2009), a *backroom of social research* must be created to integrate academic and professional practice. The process of knowledge transfer is expected to go beyond the university and the organization and have an ultimate impact on society. The transfer of knowledge should help people enjoy full citizenship

## Adaptation to European Higher Education

The decade of 2000 began to reshape European Higher Education. The European Higher Education Agency was created to initiate educational reform, including: standardizing and validating qualifications and skills; establishing a schedule of grade levels, masters and doctorates; reorienting teaching methodology in learning; and encouraging more practice and applicability (De la Fuente, 2014).

This restructuring of the processes and goals of higher education is taking place within the context of globalization and the internationalization of higher education. In recent decades,

we have witnessed a more prominent role for higher education in “the agenda of international organizations and national governments, higher education institutions and their representative bodies, student organizations and accreditation agencies” (De Wit, 2011, p. 77). Consistent with this, UNESCO has emphasized the international context of higher education. Given this requirement to internationalize its curricula (De Wit, 2011; Guerrero & Urbano, 2012), each university follows its own strategies and policies (global, multicultural, mobility of teachers and students, use and development of technology, creation of enterprises and international institutes, periodic publications). And all this takes place in a context in which the State is increasingly reducing public funding for the support of universities (Kindelán, 2013). In this context, the survival of public or private universities is dependent on its internationalization and the establishment of opportunities to collaborate with other universities in the promotion of its teaching-learning process and knowledge transfer (Barro, 2015).

The international dimension in higher education revolves around politics, the economy, society, culture and academia (De Wit, 2002). The role of universities within the context of globalization is to facilitate the flow of technology, knowledge, people, values and ideas that affect each country in particular ways. These flows are expected to stimulate rational economies (Knight, 2008).

The Bologna Declaration of 1999 and the Lisbon Strategy of 2009 highlighted two dynamics of internationalization that must coexist: competition and cooperation (De Wit, 2011). Competition in the teaching-learning process results from the transmitted knowledge, training and values of students. Nevertheless, academia pushes teachers, students and technical staff to the same international sphere. That is, all the actors in the academic community have gone from a personal competition at the national level to an international competition where research and its dissemination remain central.

## The Teaching-Research Debate in European Higher Education

The processes of internationalization and adaptation in European Higher Education are not exempt from debates or risks. Twenty-first century universities must be guarantors of the teaching-research endeavor in spite of economic pressures (Kindelan, 2013) and/or competing dynamics and social values. Universities should be more than mere transmitters of knowledge. They should also be protagonists in the process of dissemination and innovation. This will inevitably require partnerships with the business world (Gibbons et al., 1994).

One of the changes in the teaching-learning model is that it now requires students to actively participate in their education and be responsible for it. In this model, the teacher's role is to share his knowledge and become a guide in the learning process. Students must learn from many sources in their efforts to develop academic and international competencies. They must actively participate in their acquisition of knowledge and development of skills, abilities and attitudes while aiming at specific learning outcomes. To this end, the university should offer more flexibility in the teaching-learning process. Teaching strategies should focus on the curricula as well as on teaching methods (Kindelan, 2013).

### Social Work in Knowledge Transfer: European Higher Education and Social Work

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) has developed the "Global Qualification Standards and Training in Social Work" (Sewal & Jones, 2007). These represent universal propositions for the development of universal social work studies that take into account different cultures as well as the peculiarities of many countries (De Wit, 2011).

A "white book" for the social work degree was created (Vázquez, 2004) and the book, as well as the *Criteria for Designing Curricula Undergraduate Degrees in Social Work* (2007) were launched. Their aim was to promote social work curricula at different universities that revolve around generic and specialized

skills, that require the use of learning activities, and that are learning outcomes oriented.

It is necessary to modify and adapt teaching materials as part of the process of curricular evaluation to respond to emerging knowledge and competency demands. This is necessary to properly equip social workers to respond to the demands of the workplace. This should be seen as an opportunity to include the competencies of universal accessibility and design into professional practice, teaching and research (De la Fuente, 2014). Furthermore, we should also take advantage of this opportunity to introduce digital skills and technology to support social workers in their efforts to respond to adverse social realities (García-Castilla y Vírseda, 2016b).

Adapting social work curricula to satisfy the new requirements of the IFSW has required greater flexibility. This has allowed institutions to identify and rely on “best practices” and focus on learning outcomes (García-Castilla y Vírseda, 2016a).

Social work competencies must clearly integrate knowledge, values and skills. The focus on the development of competencies for practice is consistent with the applied nature of our discipline and our professional models of social action (reflection-action). Since its inception, social work knowledge has stemmed from a constant interaction between applied social research, teaching, and professional practice with different populations, problems and settings (Goyette y Lessard-Herbet, 1988). Our profession has also sought to increase our professional body of knowledge through interdisciplinary research (Juan, Morata, Morante, Trujillo, & Raya, 2013).

The goals of social work education must include, but not be limited to, the transfer of knowledge to students, who in turn will impact society through their practice and their research. As part of an exchange model, the social worker must promote a participatory process that highlights choices and shared decision-making. This approach would be a logical outcome of the values of our profession and from the so-called University Social Responsibility (USR) (Domínguez, 2009).

## Learning Experiences and Actions in Social Work

This section highlights findings of social work research and evaluations as well as other experiences-related knowledge



transfer. The European Higher Education Agency (EHEA) consistently applies standards to measure the quality and prestige of a discipline. One of the most frequently used indicators is the level of scholarly productivity and dissemination (Kindelán, 2012). In addition to scholarship, social work promotes innovation through the establishment of educational teaching models that rely on technology and experiences of cooperation. All of these actions are intended to improve the welfare of citizens. In the following, we identify the strategies that knowledge transfer relies on in its pursuit of social transformations.

### *Evaluation of scholarly productivity*

Social work and social services must adapt to new systems for measuring scholarly productivity if they wish to increase their academic prestige and standing within the university. Martínez, Diaz, Lima, Herrera, and Herrera (2014) conducted an evaluation of social work's scholarly productivity. They provided a bibliometric analysis of international research produced by Spanish researchers and academicians. They reviewed social work publications indexed in Journal Citation Reports-2011 (JCR). They found that 152 papers were published in international journals indexed in JCR. This shows a weakness in international publications. However, the trend is gradually changing. There are approximately 1,000 citations of publications highlighting relative impact and 17 highlighting high impact. The limited number of publications in the area of social work and social services is due in part to the small number of available social work journals. This, however, should not prevent an increase in publications given that there are other journals in JCR with affinity to social work.

### *Academic Social Responsibility*

Academia must encourage and lead the process of knowledge transfer in response to social demands. Research in social work and social services must seek to reverse or counter the dynamics that create poverty or increase social inequalities. Marín, Valarezo, and Sarango (2014), in collaboration with a network of Latin American Universities, identify knowledge transfer as a way to help reduce extreme poverty through a protocol consistent with Academic Social Responsibility practices.

*Interactive concept maps as learning resources in academia*

The use of technology in the teaching-learning process can facilitate the active participation of students in building their own knowledge. Cabero, Ballesteros and López (2015) conducted a study in two Andalusian universities to explore the usefulness of interactive concept maps as a teaching resource. They analyzed the possibilities and limitations of this tool for the professional and academic development of educators and social workers. Study findings highlight the need to improve the training of teachers for the management of Interactive Concept Maps, as well as acknowledge that new pedagogical methodologies are needed for learning and teaching about ethics.

*Massive online open courses (MOOC)*

This is a new university learning platform based on information and communication technologies (ICT). It is considered “a revolution with great potential in the world of education” (Vázquez-Cano & López, 2014, p. 3). This methodology differs from e-learning in the areas of cost and access. It calls for new educational spaces to facilitate the continuing education of social worker educators. It seeks to enable them to acquire digital skills and apply these to their curricula (García-Castilla y Vírveda, 2016b). This creates new possibilities for scientific publication, the design of teaching and training methods, and the creation of bi-directionality in learning from the discipline to the profession, or from the profession to the University.

*Technology for social inclusion*

The advent of technology has improved people’s quality of life. More specifically, we refer to online technology guided by social welfare criteria to help shape socio-economic systems, social justice, income distribution, and inclusion (Juárez & Avelaneda, 2011). Challenges and possibilities associated with this type of technology include: access to quality information as a social right; the use of more advanced and interconnected social software; the use of technology and telecare devices to reduce isolation and loneliness among the elderly, as well as enhanced monitoring and care; the use of mobile telephone applications to locate persons; and home devices and the use of robotics.

*New intervention spaces*

Developments in technology are creating opportunities for social workers. New social work interventions must stem from a flexible and innovative vision. Social workers must develop new and effective channels of communication between teachers and researchers within the university and the community at large. The value of enhanced communication is exemplified by the community social work specialization. Community social work values and promotes mutual aid, solidarity, social justice, rights, and resources (López, 2012). The previously mentioned values also support the advancement of technology and the use of social networks, which in turn generate new forms of communication and spaces of intervention and cooperation. The goal is to *turn the community into an action subject* beyond social work's ability to promote its self-sufficiency. Social networks are already playing an important role in community social work.

A study conducted by Rodríguez (2016) analyzed a training intervention in a social network. The study relied on semi-structured interviews with social workers from different municipalities of the Community of Madrid that comprises over one hundred thousand inhabitants. Significant study findings include that community social work at the local level needs new strength-based approaches to build the capacity of social networks and mobilize resources toward positive change. Social networks represent a new way to communicate. Social work must take advantage of them to promote empowerment. Gilchrist (2009, p. 95) states that: "the purpose of development of the community is to support and shape the creation of formal and informal networks in order to facilitate and make real the empowerment of collective action."

*Inter-academic cooperation and scientific research*

Juan and colleagues (2013), consistent with the indications of the Lisbon Strategy of 2005 (CRUE, 2001), state that this approach promotes scientific cooperation, through programs of inter-university cooperation and scientific research with the goal of a fair and more participatory society. These initiatives require voluntary actions, cooperation and work of the third social sector. They also require the integration of theory and

practice, “managing academic, scientific and professional competencies intended for intervention in an innovative field of inter-university cooperation” (Juan et al., 2013, p. 71), and the ability to implement projects tailored to specific social contexts. Our experiences with the University of Oujda in Morocco and the National Institute for Work and Social Studies of Tunisia exemplify university cooperation and social commitment to knowledge transfer.

### *Academic career and propensity to technology transfer*

A study by Aceytuno and Sánchez-López (2014), analyzed this topic in the case of the University of Huelva. The contributions of knowledge and technology transfer have important implications for the efficiency of technology transfer (Bergeb-al-Mirabent, Lafuente, & Sole, 2013; Zarrabeitia, Díaz, Ruiz, & Alvarez, 2010). According to the previously mentioned authors, personal attributes and the characteristics of their professional and academic career “determine the propensity of researchers to engage in technology transfer” (Aceytuno & Sánchez-López, 2014, pp. 80–81). The value of their study does not stem from the generalizability of findings, but from their ability to provide insights into complex phenomena. Findings suggest gender differences that give men a greater propensity to engage in technology transfer activities. Other factors associated to the greater propensity to engage in technology transfer include the academic discipline of the researcher, seniority in the university, academic rank and possession of a doctorate. Furthermore, researchers who publish more have a greater propensity towards technology transfer.

Feixas et al. (2013) conducted another research study on factors that influence teaching transfer of university faculty. They collected data by administering the *Teaching Transfer Factor Questionnaire* in 18 universities (n = 1,026). Findings related to teacher training programs in Spanish universities, revealed highly frequent use of short-term training modalities (courses, seminars, workshops) versus seven long training activities. They also revealed a tendency to focus training on competency development in the areas of management, the teaching-learning process, communication and language skills, technological skills and personal development. Because of this, we propose

that there is a measure of transfer in teacher's training. This takes place mostly within the context of programs that focus on the development of teaching capacity and not of programs seeking curricular, institutional or professional development (Feixas et al., 2013).

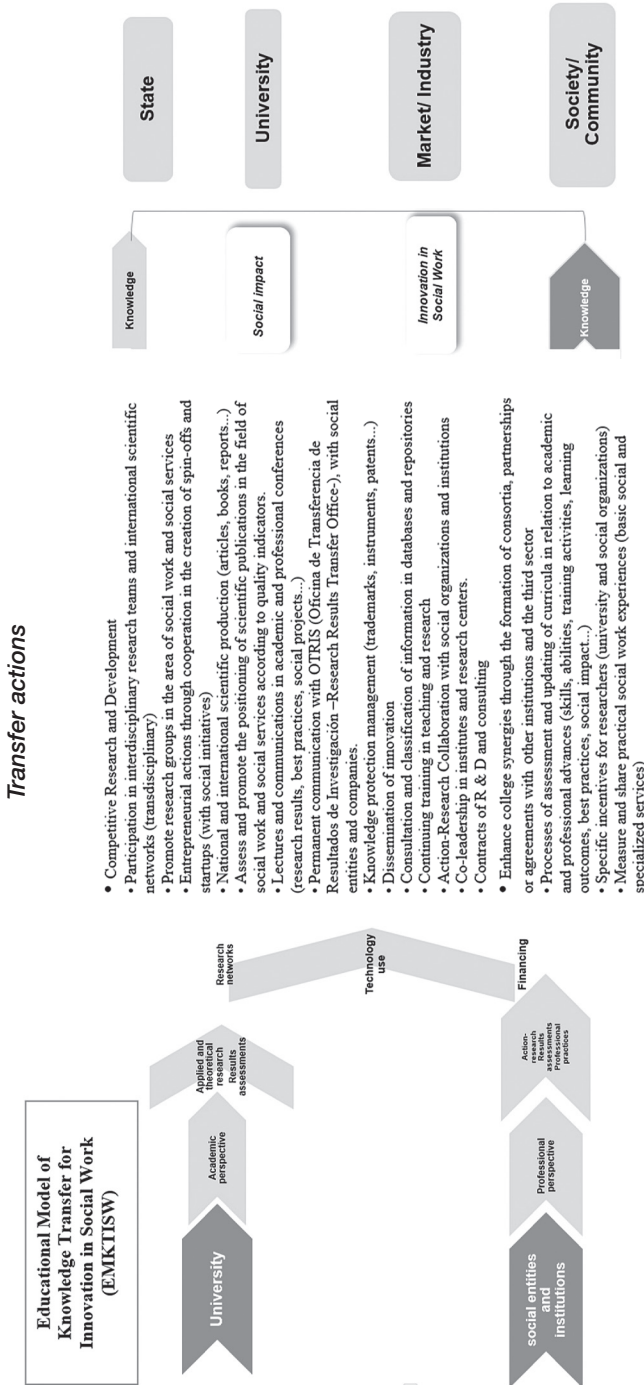
*Educational Model of Knowledge Transfer for Innovation in Social Work (EMKTISW)*

As noted at the beginning, this article contains a literature review on the topic of knowledge transfer and various formative experiences aimed at producing social transformations. Based on this, we propose a model of innovation in social work. This model should contribute to the dissemination of research findings and professional experiences. This model seeks to provide guidance to social work practitioners and researchers, given that knowledge transfer revolves around research and the application of research findings to professional practice.

The Educational Model of Knowledge Transfer for Innovation in Social Work (METCITS) involves 19 actions related to research and innovation initiated by government agencies, businesses, University research, development and innovation projects, and civic organizations. We emphasize that this educational model originates in academia and in civic organizations trying to impact the welfare state. The model is based on the following premises: (1) the university, from an academic perspective, conducts theoretical or basic, and applied research. Academic research projects are usually sophisticated and ambitious, and supported by interdisciplinary scientific networks; (2) civic institutions, social entities, and practicing professionals demand research knowledge with practical applications. They participate in the integration of research and practice to improve interventions and social care.

Universities and other social institutions or entities rely on research networks, technology and public and/or private funding to develop a set of transfer actions (see Figure 1) (Arias y Aristizábal, 2011; Barro, 2015; De Wit, 2011; Friedman y Silberman, 2003; Hidalgo, 2006; Parellada, 2015). This generates knowledge and facilitates novel ideas that, through different processes, contribute to greater social impact. Thus, the level of impact is determined by the cumulative effect of transformative

Figure 1. Educational Model of Knowledge Transfer for Innovation in Social Work (EMKTISW)



**SOCIAL WELFARE**

actions that inform the formulation of social policies by the state, such as care plans, programs and projects, redistribution of resources, employability models, sustainability mechanisms and social solidarity. Within universities, these actions may facilitate the creation of new methods, models, techniques, development, indicators of quality, novel ideas. In the market and in the industry they may lead to the creation of new models of social attention, productive sector, reliability, and validity. Finally, in communities and civil society, these actions may lead to social rights, resources, benefits, and citizen participation.

The University fulfills its social responsibility by responding to the demands of society and contributing to economic and social development through knowledge transfer. This entails a collective effort on the part of the university, the state and the business sector. Subsequently, society is incorporated as a receptor and participant of the synergies that result from the different innovation processes. This forces all other actors to become involved and become accountable to funders of special initiatives and to those who demand social innovations.

The role of the social work discipline from human rights and social justice perspective is to contribute to improve social welfare. Social workers, as agents of change and mediators between government and other actors, must take advantage of their positions within universities, institutions and various social entities to facilitate the creation of educational approaches that generate knowledge and applied models.

The goal of scientific discovery is not only to produce goods and services while being guided by competitiveness and productivity; it must also seek to meet social needs and promote cooperation. Social work has a shared responsibility with other disciplines to research, innovate, transfer knowledge and contribute to the well-being of society.

### Conclusion: From Social Innovation to Full Citizenship

This article has described several processes and actions associated with the transfer of knowledge and innovation in social work. Our profession is immersed in a social context dominated by globalization and the internationalization of university

education. Our information- and knowledge-driven society requires that we connect academia, scholarship and technology to the professional practice of social workers. We need to formulate effective and rational policies at the university level related to knowledge transfer to the profession and to society with the ultimate goal of improving our collective welfare.

Scientific and technological innovations are directly related to economic and social development. As part of their response to social problems, universities are expected to use foresight to analyze future trends and formulate pertinent competitive or cooperative strategies in partnership with civil society.

Social work research faces multiple new challenges, such as those described in *Horizon 2020*. Collective problems demanding an effective response include physical illness, demographic changes and the resulting demands on the welfare state. There is a need to concentrate knowledge transfer efforts during the next ten years on the three areas of: technology and aging; technology, environmental management and citizen participation; and technology and advanced automation (López, 2014).

These challenges require researchers to generate knowledge to be transferred to the state as well as the public and private sectors to guide and/or inform their policies and collective actions. We must engage in research-informed practices, especially when working under adverse conditions. Social work researchers, educators and practitioners must work cooperatively with other professionals, the business sector and government officials to generate, disseminate and apply new knowledge. Social workers should participate in research and knowledge transfer that lead to social innovation, as a sign of disciplinary maturity, to sustain and advance educational programs, to favor social transformations, and to help members of our societies enjoy full citizenship.



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