DA NANG — Viet Nam should push ahead with the development of social work as a profession to help the country deal with the impacts of modernisation, attendants at a two-day national conference on the development of social work in Viet Nam agreed.

Around 250 senior Government officials and academic and social work practitioners met at the high-ranking conference to discuss the importance of developing social work as a profession in Viet Nam, held in central Da Nang City on Tuesday and Wednesday.

The Government, led by the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) and the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in partnership with the United Nations and various international NGOs, civil societies and national and international universities, was looking at how to improve social work education at several levels, how to integrate social workers into the Government structure and how to enhance social worker services in Viet Nam.

In a speech delivered at the conference, deputy minister of MOLISA Nguyen Trong Dam said that social work had developed in the world as a profession that responded to social problems. "However, social work as a profession is being placed at the first stage of development despite lots of social assistance over the past century," Dam said.

He added that the work had not been developed adequately in terms of a legal framework, education and training, the development of a social network or other services, as well as people’s awareness.
"Developing social work as a profession is vital for the country’s development and integration," he said, adding that the Prime Minister had assigned MoLISA to preside over and collaborate with concerned ministries and sectors to develop the Project on Development of Social Work to be submitted to the Government this year.

Sharing the idea, Deputy Minister of Home Affairs Nguyen Duy Thang said that the country should have social welfare workers with much-needed professional skills to deal with emerging issues in socio-economic development.

"We should establish a separate system of wages and allowances for social workers not only in the labour, invalids and social affairs sector, but also in others, including the health sector and education and training, as well as in the civil sector," he said.

Speaking at the event, Irish Ambassador Maeve Collins said that the meeting itself was very timely. A strategy to develop social work must reflect the many social changes that Viet Nam itself was going through.

Participants at the meeting also heard that Viet Nam had already taken a major step in recognising social work as a training discipline at the university level.

"It is time for Viet Nam to look at further steps, such as the development of a specific job core and designated social work positions in a number of agencies and organisations, and to develop systems of social work services," said representative of UNICEF in Viet Nam Jesper Morch.

President of International Association of Schools of Social Work Angelina Yuen said that developing social work as a profession in Viet Nam was a sound way that was suitable with international trends.

As estimated by the Department of Social Protection under the MOLISA, as of 2008, Viet Nam had approximately 7.5 million elderly people, including about 200,000 lonely old people, and 5.3 million disabled people, of which about 300,000 were seriously disabled and unable to care for themselves. Meanwhile, there were over 1.4 million poor children and about 2.7 million poor households. Among the above social groups, about 1.3 million people were subject to social assistance, representing some 1.52 per cent of the population.

"Preliminary calculations based on the above data showed approximately 25 per cent of Viet Nam’s population was in need of services provided by social workers. As such, the manpower needed for the field of social work is huge," said rector of the university of Labour and Social Affairs Nguyen Tiep.

He said that Viet Nam should improve training materials and programmes to effectively meet the practical need for qualified social workers. By doing so, trained social workers could meet the country’s actual needs and be valued by society.
The attendants also heard speeches of representatives from ministries and centres and experiences from international organisations and universities in developing social work.

Also at the conference, a statement for co-operation on the development of social work in Viet Nam was signed with relevant agencies and various international universities and partners.

Accordingly, they will promote social work in Viet Nam, including improving the legal framework for developing social work, job codes, professional standards and codes of ethics for social workers, promoting social work education through the development of vocational training and graduate and post-graduate level programmes and developing systems of social assistance and social work services.

The conference aimed to raise awareness and commitments among policy-makers and implementers to support the professionalisation of social work in Viet Nam, which included job codes and positions within various Government structures, professional standards of practice and improved education at graduate, post-graduate and vocational levels.

"The development of social work plays an important role in the current context of Viet Nam. With the development of social work, Viet Nam is able to alleviate poverty, effectively address social problems, promote greater social justice and equality and respond to other complicated problems that the nation faces. There is an urgent need to develop social work as a profession.

The positions of specialised social workers should be recognised in the relevant agencies and organisations, and there should be a job code as well as a system for social service delivery," said Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, Minister of MOLISA. — VNS