



# **SOCIAL WORK AS A GLOBAL PROFESSION**

HANDBOOK FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

EVELINE AMMANN DULA, SWETHA RAO DHANANKA, PASCAL RUDIN & RORY TRUELL



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Pascal Rudin & Rory Truell**

**The International Federation of Social Workers**





Bern University  
of Applied Sciences

# Alumni BFH

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**Pascal Rudin** combines expertise in social work, child protection, and IT. He holds a PhD in Social Work, alongside degrees in engineering and business administration, and brings over two decades of experience blending these fields. Pascal advocates for children's rights on an international level, including serving as a representative to the United Nations. As the head of operations at IFSW, he has led significant initiatives, such as developing IT platforms for global engagement during the 2020 pandemic. Pascal is currently conducting research at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, on genital cutting in children.

**Rory Truell** is the Secretary-General of the International Federation of Social Workers since taking office at IFSW in 2011. In this role he frequently visits frontline social work practice settings across the world. Often inspired by

the innovative practice he witnesses, Rory shares this learning by incorporating the examples into his writing, teaching and presentations. Rory has actively supported the development of the Indigenous, Education and UN commissions within the Federation's structures to expand the outward-looking operational focus and influence of social work on geo-political systems. Consequently, he has contributed to a new era of professional social work that recognises the essential social work role in co-building a new eco-social world.

## Dedication

This handbook is dedicated to Jan Zychlinski, social worker and professor at the Bern University of Applied Sciences (BFH) and long-time friend and colleague, who sadly passed away far too early in 2022. Jan co-taught international social work with us all and was a part of the very first discussions conceptualising this book as a contribution to our global community. We would like to commemorate his tireless commitment to social work as a global profession, which, as he would constantly say *“is far more than humanitarian aid or assistance, as it has the goal of social transformation”*.



## Foreword

By Rory Truell

Social work is going through massive change! This is an organically produced book about how change can happen in social work education. It is based on developments at the Bern University of Applied Sciences 'International Social Work in Context programme' from the Bachelor's degree program in Social Work. It is a model that can be adapted and / or developed in any other social work education setting throughout the world. The programme emerged to incorporate the latest global learning from a growing recognition that Western or Northern Hemisphere models of social work are not universally appropriate or always effective. This stems from the 2014 International Definition of Social Work that recognised for the first time globally the importance of indigenous knowledge and people's responsibilities with and to each other in the context of social work's role in strengthening communities, the ultimate organic social protection systems.

The growth of the International Federation of Social Workers in the last decade has provided a flood of knowledge from our colleagues in Africa, Latin America and Asia-Pacific that has created co-learning for the profession as a whole. As this programme has developed in the Bachelor's degree program in social work in Bern and more students have been exposed to the complexities of different models of social work from around the world, they report that they have been challenged to rethink many of the elements of their traditional Western social work training. In the context of global challenges such as climate change and the polarisation of geo-politics, many of the students are now developing different ways of working with people, co-building sustainable change, and developing new social work paradigms. This handbook we hope will be of use to other social work education departments around the world in developing people's understanding of the role of social work as a necessary part of contributing to economic, environment and social harmony, for our shared futures.

# Introduction

By Eveline Amman Dula

The idea of the handbook was born from the collaboration in the module 'Social work in an international context' in the Bachelor's degree program in Social Work at the BFH. To understand social work as a global profession, considering the current worldwide developments, debates and discourse was the central motivation for the involvement of Rory Truell, Secretary-General of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), in the module. Through the exchange about the primary content, the structure and the didactic setting and the constant further development over the years, a concept has emerged that we would like to share here in this publication. We hope that it will inspire other departments of social work education to also consider developing an international module – or integrating information about social work as a global profession within their core programs. Student feedback has consistently shown that it has opened their eyes to different ways of applying social work principles and made them think carefully about what kind of practice they want to evolve.

It should be noted however that our experience of teaching this module is in Switzerland, where the Bachelor's degree program in Social Work is very much shaped by the local or national context. In exchanges with Swiss social work students, it became clear that social work in an international context is often associated with international NGOs in the field of humanitarian aid or development cooperation, where social workers from the Global North work in projects in the Global South<sup>1</sup>. This handbook aims to overcome this

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<sup>1</sup> Global North and Global South are increasingly replacing terms such as 'developed and developing countries', 'emerging economies' and the previously frequently used term 'Third World'. They are

oversimplification of social work and to show the meaning of social work as a global profession. This means that social workers working in national territories are frequently faced with international context, for example in domains for migration that include transnational networks of care and remittance and diasporic networks, but also local conditions that are conditioned by border-crossing phenomena like climate change, pandemics, or other challenges to be addressed on an international or global level. A challenge for social work in a globalised world is to overcome its narrow national focus. Social work as a global profession in its definition and principles helps to broaden one's own horizon and thereby develop new perspectives also for local social work.

The handbook is written from our experience, trying to overcome western bias in social work that mainly focuses on methods and theories of social work applied in a social welfare state and a society characterised by individualistic and neo-liberal perspectives on society. Our aim is to inspire social work students, lecturers, and professionals to discover social work as a global profession, to reflect the interwoven history of social work with its colonial past and to consider power and dependencies on different levels. This is intended to encourage debates about universal values and principles and the relevance of indigenous knowledge for social work, and to discover other rationales for social work in different contexts that permits a wider overview than the traditional western perspective.

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used here as designations to describe the situation of countries in the globalised world as value- and hierarchy-free as possible. In this sense, a country of the Global South is in a politically, economically or socially disadvantaged state. The countries of the Global North, on the other hand, are in a privileged position in terms of prosperity, political freedom and economic development. This is also intended to emphasise existing inequalities and the resulting dependency relationships. The designations are not intended to generalise the conditions in all the countries concerned. They are also only to be understood geographically to a limited extent (see online: [Globaler Süden/Globaler Norden](#)).

We believe that learning from different social work experiences and developments around the world is a very important step for the future development of social work as a global profession. For this reason, we would like this handbook to be a stimulus and a tool to further develop social work as a global profession. The selection of contents are suggestions – to be further developed – for the respective contexts. References and further links are meant to stimulate, adapt, update, and provide further insight into the contents.

## How to use the Handbook

This handbook is based on the experience with social work students in Switzerland and has been shaped over the years by student feedback. This results in examples of teaching and learning, discussion topics, questions, etc. Depending on the context, the content, examples, and questions would have to be adapted. In every chapter, we provide some links and references for further readings in order to adapt the content of the different units to the specific context.

It is designed as open access to be used by anybody interested in social work as a global profession, for students, practitioners and also for social work teaching staff. Too often, we notice that the international dimension of social work is not offered in university or integrated in social work courses. We hope that eventually all social work programs will embed the international dimensions as a core course, but in the meantime, the approach we have learnt from could be used as an add-on to existing curricula. For teachers using this, we would encourage you to find your own examples.

The handbook is designed to support and stimulate the development of lessons or teaching units on social work in an international context. The chapters can be used as a whole course, or as teaching units.

## Structure of the Handbook

The book corresponds to the structure of the module, which includes a total of seven chapters. Each of us has drafted chapters and the reader will notice a variety of writing styles. We have deliberately left this style variation in the book as it models the differing ways we taught on the programme and we hope that the readers, like the live participants in the classroom, will benefit from differing perspectives and communication approaches.

The handbook may be used as a textbook but could also be a possible structure of a module, with every chapter used as the content for one or two module units. Each chapter is structured in the same way: first the learning objectives are presented as main orientation, followed by thematic introduction based on selected literature addressing some key questions regarding the topic. Then some examples and case studies for the classroom are described, followed by further questions, and annotated literature list for further reading. Finally, you can find some teaching exercises to use for classroom or online learning.

To introduce the context of social work as a global profession, the handbook starts with a discussion on the international Definition of Social Work, the International Federation of Social Workers and its historical developments, and ethical principles. This is followed by an introduction to postcolonial theories as a theoretical basis for situating social work in the context of global and international power and hierarchies, interdependencies, and interweavings, and for critically reflecting on one's own positioning.

Social work as a global profession is linked to the work of international organisations like the United Nations that will be presented, and the relevance for social work explained. Human and other rights are also featured as they are a central orientation of the global profession. Based on selected methods and working principles, concrete approaches of social work like

empowerment, community development and eco-social practices are presented. We consider these to be particularly relevant for social work as a global profession in order to overcome the focus on individual casework often used in the Western contexts.

# Chapter 1

## Social Work as a Global Profession: International Definition and Ethical Principles

By Rory Truell

### Overview

In this chapter we look at the role of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) in facilitating global standards, policies and actions. Our focus is then turned to two very important instruments, the Global Definition of Social Work and the Global Statement of Ethical Principles. In the discussion we reflect on an often-put question: *“Can one description of social work be practical, given that social work is undertaken in such a diverse range of social, economic and cultural settings?”*

Following this we briefly examine some actions taken by the international profession in relation to Covid-19 and working with others for the transformation of global and national systems of power.

### Learning objectives

- To understand social work as a global profession.
- To know and reflect on the international Definition of Social Work and the Statement of Ethical Principles.
- To identify the importance of social work to societies.
- To consider how international policies can affect your practice.



## The beginnings of global social work

The idea of a person being skilled in managing social situations or preventing social crisis is most likely embedded in every traditional culture and ultimately these are the antecedents of modern professional social work. At the global level professional social work was officially launched in 1928 at the First International Conference of Social Work, which (remarkably for the time) was attended by 2481 delegates from 42 countries (Healy & Hall, 2007)<sup>2</sup>. They met in Paris, and it must have been a massive undertaking for the delegates from the Americas, Africa, Asia and the South Pacific as they would have needed to spend many days or weeks on either a sailing or steam ship to participate. Their commitment reflected the need to bring together the leaders and representatives of social policy and social work in developing their role in building a new world, based on equality and social justice.

The first international conference took place at a time of increasing professionalisation of social work, linked to the formalisation of social work education and the founding of schools of social work all over the world. Previous to this, in 1899, the first full program of social work education began in Amsterdam. In 1904 there were some trainings in New York and in Germany. Alice Salomon opened a school of social work in Berlin in 1908. In Eastern Europe, the 'Training School for Social Work' was founded in Warsaw, in the 1920s and 1930s schools of social work were initiated in Chile and Argentina (Healy, 2012). The first school of social work in Africa was founded in 1924 and 1936 in Egypt. In 1922 social work training opened in Beijing,

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<sup>2</sup> Also springing from that 1928 conference was the birth of two other sister social work organisations: the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Council on Social Work, now renamed the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW). Each of these three global entities have since worked together at varying levels, and in more recent years IASSW and IFSW have striven to jointly develop key policies to ensure alignment between the teaching and practice of social work.

China. Most of the trainings were highly influenced by the 'American model' of social work (ibid.). In 1936 the first school for professional social work opened in Mumbai, focusing on urban problems and to train labour welfare officers to cope with the new factory labour force as families moved from rural villages to Mumbai. By the mid 1930s in all inhabited continents, there were professionally trained social workers. This is an impressive story of the global diffusion of innovation in the field of social care, but also highly influenced by the imperialistic world order and power structures.

The organisation of global social work in its early years was significantly disrupted by the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, but its work and mission remained intact, resulting in the profession contributing to significant changes in geo-political social policy after the war. In a number of industrial countries, for example, social workers advocated for and helped design the first welfare states. In one such case, the United Kingdom, a social worker, Clement Attlee, was elected as Prime Minister and his government founded the National Health Service (NHS), which is still in place today, although under significant strain with increasing financial commitments. Social workers also worked alongside many political leaders, ushering in new global policies such as the Marshall Plan (see online: [Marshall Plan](#)) and even more significantly, the formation of the United Nations itself and its foundation legislation, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Healy, 2008), indicating that the history of social work reflects at its core that it is a human rights profession.

The restoration period following World War II was a very important time for social work. Many international programs, projects and opportunities were created at that time. Social work was then introduced into Asian and African countries by American and European experts to address the problems of so-called 'underdevelopment' (ibid.). Social work was also reintroduced in the countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc, including Russia, Eastern European nations, China and Vietnam with a substantial involvement of foreign influences.

Today, the profession of social work is not as influential, having suffered significantly in the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s under a differing geo-political era, that of neo-liberalism. In this period, structural adjustment policies were developed by two of the Bretton Woods institutions, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. They were originated due to a series of global economic disasters during the late 1970s like the oil crisis, multiple economic depressions, and stagflation. The structural adjustment policies aimed to boost economic growth, addressing balance of payments deficits and reducing poverty, and were linked to stabilisation policies, like cutting wages, eliminating food subsidies, budget deficit reduction through higher taxes and lower government spendings. This included a strong orientation on neo-liberal politics, including the reduction of social and welfare policies. This period highlighted and today continues to promote individualism and individual merit over social solidarity. During this time, laws and policies in many countries changed from systems of social solidarity, protecting local economies and social rights, to systems focusing on the neo-liberal market, reducing social welfare and consequently increasing inequality.

Social work's early and more influential years were not perfect as since that time, the profession and the world has learnt a lot more from peoples and cultures that were then both unintentionally and intentionally ignored. The profession has also worked hard to overcome its complicity with colonial practice. This complicity has included setting up social services for the colonisers but not the local colonised populations, or exporting Western models of social work in vastly different cultural settings leading to devastating effect on indigenous peoples. But the profession is now moving forward with much more inclusivity, increasing in membership and again promoting a new set of geo-political relationships which are designed to 'leave no one behind'. More about this will be discussed below, but first we should look at the social work profession today, its main policies and how this affects practitioners.

## What is IFSW and what does the global profession do?

IFSW comprises national associations or unions of social workers. A national association is a social work-led membership organisation that normally determines the standards, ethics and policies within each country. In some countries the national association can be quite powerful and can influence national policy while, in others, associations are still on the journey of becoming a strong independent voice in their respective countries.

***Reflection: How would you evaluate the national association of social workers in your country on this spectrum and what do you think you and others could do to support social work having a stronger positive influence?***

In IFSW, the national associations of social workers gather to set international standards, policies and actions. These act as the glue that makes social work an international profession. For example, if a social worker, say from Morocco, witnessed a social worker's practice from Australia, she would recognise what that social worker is doing. "Arh", the Moroccan social worker might say, "the Australian is inquiring about the person's relationships, which ones are supportive and which ones are not. Now she is helping the family to identify their strengths". This is because all the associations have worked together through the international profession, creating a binding set of principles and policies that form a unique framework which defines what social workers do at all societal levels (micro, mezzo and macro) and their role in society.

The international Definition of Social Work, the standards, policies and their subsequent actions are continuously growing and expanding as the profession acquires more member organisations that jointly react to changing conditions, such as climate change, wars, geo-political contexts and economic crisis situations. With the profession's growth for example, between 2010 and 2024, IFSW member organisations, associations and unions

numbered at 80 in 2010, but now there are 153. The new member organisations have brought with them differing ways of applying social work in their local contexts such as the utilisation of ‘Ubuntu’ (see online: [Ubuntu](#)) that has been originally developed in the African context. These relatively new voices have had a profound influence on the rest of the global profession and created ongoing widespread conversations on how we can improve social work practice by sharing learning with other regions and cultures.

The new voices have helped the global profession to overcome the Western bias that has for too long dominated the social work profession. Consequently, across the profession there is now a deeper and sincere interest in indigenous social work and a desire to incorporate learnings from indigeneity into Western practice models as these in many cases are proven to provide better outcomes. One example of this is Family Group Decision Making as developed by Māori social workers as an alternative to systems that too often resulted in children being removed from their families, that is used today in many countries like the United States, the Netherlands, Ireland and Switzerland as a new method in the field of child protection (Wikipedia, 2024).

But despite this co-learning that has emerged across the profession, can one description or understanding of social work apply to all situations, given the differing social, economic and cultural conditions? Can social work be similar between a nomadic tribe in Somalia and a contemporary mental health setting in New Zealand?

### **Case Study: ‘Mohammad’**

This very question was answered for me (Rory) when I met Mohammad, a Somali social worker who approached me at an IFSW conference in Kenya. I was there in my past role as co-chair of the International Review of the Global Definition of Social Work. The Kenyan conference was one of many places

throughout the world where consultation took place on what should be in a new global definition of social work. Very often, in these consultation gatherings, someone would usually say that it was impossible to make an overarching formulation of professional social work, for example, how possibly could a social worker in Washington share a meaningful definition of practice with a social worker working alongside waste pickers in Dhaka? And until I met Mohammad, I found this a difficult question to answer.

Mohammad, in his late 20s, waited patiently to speak with me. He was much taller than I, yet when we spoke his eyes focused firmly on our feet. He said, *“Dr Rory, I have heard about the work of IFSW and the global definition, but I would like to know about you as a social worker”*.

I replied that he did not need to address me as ‘Dr’ and in the profession, we use first names. Mohammad gazed more deeply at the ground and said that in his culture it was important to address people formally and he repeated his question. After I had explained my background in New Zealand, in both community and mental health, I asked Mohammad to tell me about his social work practice. I had never been to Somaliland and wondered about the context and challenges that he faced.

Looking to the ground, Mohammad humbly said, *“I work in the same way as you Dr Rory”*. He was shy and it appeared that he didn’t think his experience would be interesting to me. After a few more questions he relented and told me about his work the previous week: *“I worked with a nomadic tribe in Somaliland. Last week there was a woman of 16 years who was pregnant but not married. This can be a big problem in our culture, and it brought shame to the tribe and so she was to be expelled and left on her own”*.

As Mohammad was talking, I was thinking his social work practice could not be the same as mine. The culture, religion, poverty and geography were as far away as I could imagine from my past practice experiences in New Zealand.

I interrupted him and asked, *“what are the consequences of being expelled from the tribe and what did you do?”*. He gave a slight shake of his bowed head: *“If she has no one else it is horrible. No one can survive by himself or herself. So as soon as I heard about this, I travelled to meet the woman and asked her if she wanted me to be*

*her social worker. She did and we discussed what should happen next. Then I spoke with her mother and father. It took many hours as her mother felt that her daughter had brought shame on the family, but both the mother and father said that if the tribal chiefs agreed that their daughter could stay, then they as parents would accept her back in the family. I went to another family and asked if they would lend the young woman some goats for a year, so that she could breed them and trade milk. That family agreed. Then I went to the elders and explained that the woman would not be a burden on the tribe, as she would have her own goats and could contribute to the life of the tribe. The elders discussed the situation and said she could stay". "You see Dr Rory, I work just the same as you."*

He was right. Mohammad applied the same social work principles that millions of social workers do and, indeed, as I would have in my professional background in New Zealand. He had respected the young woman's sense of confidentiality and decision-making by asking her if she wanted him to act as a social worker and co-developed a plan with her. He then conducted family work and supported her mother and father in overcoming the stigma of unmarried pregnancy. This was followed by generating resources to support the young woman. In my work in New Zealand, it was never goats, more often benefits, housing or new social connections, but these were the resources available to Mohammad and the 16-year-old woman in this context. Once this was secured, he then successfully advocated with the authorities to recognise her status and membership of their community.

I thanked Mohammad, reflecting back my observation, that indeed he did work the same as me, but in a significantly different context. I told him he had really helped me in my role as a facilitator of a new global definition of social work.

*"But I haven't finished Dr Rory. I have to go back to the tribe after this conference. This tribe and many others are so poor, and life is so hard, that they look to the most extreme religious texts for hope. It is all they think they have. I will offer to work with them, for them to learn that they have other resources and that they need to support any future woman who becomes pregnant but does not have a husband".*

In his rebuttal, Mohammad had laid the cornerstone in the foundation of social work: the facilitation of social change. Now he had fully answered any

doubts I had as a co-chair of the review of the global definition and that there could be one description of social work that applied to all settings. He had, after all, described all the main principles of the social work profession.

***Reflection: This is just one of many social work examples. During your practice placement or in your work in a social agency, can you recall an example and describe the professional principles that underlay the social workers' actions?***

## The Global Definition of Social Work

The revised Global Definition of Social Work promotes the profession's commitment to social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people. The changes to the global definition, along with recognition of the importance of various forms of knowledge production, encourage critical review of the implications of a shift from an emphasis on individual approaches to the importance of collective and macro perspectives in social work intervention (Ornellas, et al., 2016). This definition states that:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels (IFSW, 2014).

Nearly a decade since its endorsement, this definition has been, in many countries, embedded into law or recognised by legal bodies as a description of the role and purpose of the profession. Such countries value the importance of the social work profession's role in working with people and



communities in removing barriers that create vulnerability or transforming contexts of poverty and disadvantage. In more authoritarian countries, however, or those with an absent or minimal welfare structure, it is often not acknowledged by the state's systems.

***Reflection: Is the Global Definition of Social Work recognised in the law of your country? If not, do you think that it should be – what steps could you take to address this?***

This definition, endorsed in 2014, held key differences to the versions that preceded it. Along with specifying human rights, this version also emphasises 'responsibilities'. This is in recognition that, at the day-to-day level, human rights are maintained, or not, by the people around us, and that each of us has a duty, a responsibility, to respect the rights of others. This often occurs in social work practice, for example when working with a family or a divided community, social workers will assist people to listen to and understand one another and each other's sense of their rights. Through this, the social worker attempts to create a context of balancing everyone's rights and a culture of people taking responsibility in respecting and upholding the rights of others.

Older approaches to social work which focused on one set of rights, for example child rights, too often result in the child being removed from a vulnerable family. Whereas a more holistic blended approach to rights and responsibilities far more often ends with the whole family strengthening their culture of care for all family members, sustainably addressing the original concern. This is almost always a far better outcome as opposed to the child being removed and internalising that they cannot be loved by their family, or that they and the family will forever be 'dysfunctional'.

Another key addition to the 2014 definition is the inclusion of 'indigenous knowledge' being recognised as an underpinning form of knowing and understanding, alongside other 'social sciences'. Prior to this the global

profession had been unintentionally blind and deaf to indigenous wisdom, even though many indigenous philosophies resonate with the ideals of social work. For example, recognising the interdependence of people, between themselves, and also with nature – reinforcing everyone’s responsibility, not just in this generation, but also to the generations to come.

While this definition has made steps forward, it has already been surpassed by developing world consciousness. It does not speak directly to the need for people to co-design and co-build new world systems that can support thriving respectful shared futures for all people. Nor does it specifically locate the crucial role of social workers in facilitating sustainable development. Perhaps the next iteration will describe the social workers’ expanded role which blends co-working for environmental, social justice and economic sustainability.

***Reflection: How would you draft a definition of social work that is applicable to your own country and other countries and cultures that you have visited?***

From the preceding discussion of the case study of Mohammad the suggestion was made that there could be one definition of social work that applied to all settings as he had seemed to describe all the main principles of social work in his work with Somaliland tribes. However, are there aspects of this definition that you feel could be more relevant to particular cultures, or would you frame it differently if you were devising this?

## The Global Statement of Ethical Principles

The global social work ethical principles, like the definition, was developed and endorsed by social work representatives from across the world. We could see in Mohammad’s work how the principles were revealed when working in a ‘nomadic tribe’. In my own (i.e. Rory’s) practice, these integrated principles are more important than any textbook or model, and

when I get stuck or challenged, I find the wisdom of the nine principles helps me to find a solution.

Here are the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles – International Federation of Social Workers (ifsw.org) (IFSW, 2018):

1. Recognition of the inherent dignity of humanity
2. Protecting human rights
3. Promoting social justice
4. Promoting the right to self-determination
5. Promoting the right to participation
6. Respect for confidentiality and privacy
7. Treating people as whole persons
8. Ethical use of technology and social media
9. Professional integrity.

The principles help us to understand how social work is different to other ‘helping’ professions. When looking at them together we understand a person in a social context where their rights need to be recognised and balanced with others. We see a person as a whole, not only as a drug addict, or a depressive, hungry or homeless person. We recognise that everyone has strengths and that they can use these to build a better future for themselves and others. We see diversity as a plus – that our differences are also our strengths, as we all have different ways to contribute to solutions. And through the principles, we can understand our professional role in facilitating social solidarity so that all people can experience dignity.

***Reflection: How would you apply these principles in your work as a social worker or student social worker?***

It is noted that it is the responsibility of national associations and organisations to develop and regularly update their own codes of ethics or ethical guidelines, to be consistent with this Statement of Ethical Principles, considering local situations. It is also the responsibility of national associations

to inform social workers and schools of social work about this Statement and ensure that social workers act in accordance with the current ethical code or guidelines in their country. As a social worker or student social worker you need to familiarise yourself with the Statement and consider if this is consistent with the work or the placements that you are undertaking. If not, what is it you can do to improve the situation and bring about more ethical practice in your workplace?

## Global social work in action

The international profession also works beyond the creation of standards and policies. For example, within the first 72 hours of the breakout of Covid-19 in Wuhan China, the Chinese Association of Social Workers provided a report to all the other national associations on their emergency responses. IFSW also immediately set out guidelines advising social workers on their essential roles during a pandemic. The international profession knew what to do and what would be the challenges. This was because the profession had shared its learning from SARS, Ebola, HIV/AIDS and other epidemics and pandemics.

Frontline professionals are often ahead of governments who are initially slow to react, then sometimes overreact, without understanding the impact of their emergency policies. Many governments at first thought that the pandemic needed only a medical response as they had not thought through the consequences of the effects of lockdowns on the public. Nor had they considered the needs of people who rely on services for support, or in some countries, people's access to food and clean water.

In the early days of the pandemic, most governments tried to close social services in their blanket approach to lockdown. Consequently, social workers around the world advocated for services to remain open but adapt to the conditions. The social workers were generally successful and managed to help governments understand that services can operate effectively without

spreading the virus, but also, that these adapted services are key to the success of controlling the virus.

For example, social workers in many countries worked with community leaders helping them to understand the importance of social distancing and utilising masks, gloves, and disinfectant. Social workers also set up community-wide online networks providing people with advice on how to safely access food and medicines. In rural areas, social workers organised food and medication delivery systems and in countries where the economy came to a complete stop, social workers supported communities to produce their own soap, share medicines and create alternative incomes.

Consequently, social work was recognised in several countries as being essential alongside medical, nursing and the policing professions. For more information on the social work response to Covid, see IFSW, 2020<sup>3</sup>. All of this was only possible because social workers shared information and provided each other with mutual support through the international social work profession. But this was not the only type of action taken by the social work profession during the pandemic.

Prior to the pandemic, in countries with bureaucratic welfare systems, social workers experienced ongoing challenges in coordinating with other professions. But during the pandemic when a social worker rang a community health nurse, she picked up the phone. It became clear to nearly all the people-focused professions that it was necessary to break out of the silos and policy constraints that have separated, for example, health and social services. This necessity was also felt at the global level and the health professions have since been working closely with IFSW.

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<sup>3</sup> Also see: Ethical challenges for social workers during Covid-19: A global perspective – International Federation of Social Workers (ifsw.org).

The new local and global partnerships between the professions quickly identified common interests in working beyond the pandemic to address inequalities and the social determinants of poor health and social problems. This included recognition of the need to develop new policies where silos between health and social care are removed, and also that the public, rather than centralised bureaucratic governments, are the key actors in co-designing and co-building future health and social service systems.

As this work became more visible, other global organisations and professions wanted to participate. Within a short time, a coalition of partners was established including the global trade unions, international faiths, UN agencies, the world student unions, the Commonwealth and other professions. Jointly the partners, representing hundreds of millions of people, launched the *People's Global Summit for a New Eco-Social World: Leaving No One Behind*. During the summit many of the world's social, ecological, women's and indigenous movements participated, contributing their ideas for how the world needed to be transformed to be socially just and sustainable for all people to enjoy. From this, the People's Charter for a New Eco-Social World was established<sup>4</sup>.

The Charter commits to an ongoing process of social transformation. It recognises that the current system of national governments is very limited in solving the challenges we all face: climate crisis, spiralling inequality, conflicts between states and so on. This is because nation states are designed around self-serving and competitive principles, rather than as cooperative states, and the Charter also notes, tend to be blind to the diversity in their populations and the rich human resources in their communities, therefore failing to unlock the human potential for finding solutions to challenges.

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<sup>4</sup> New Policy: The Role of Social Workers in Advancing a New Eco-Social World – International Federation of Social Workers (ifsw.org).

The Charter proposes a shift in power from governments to people's assemblies, as in almost all instances, people don't want poverty in their own lives, or in the lives of others. Nor do people want war in their own lives, or in the lives of others. This work is continuing and growing in influence. Check out this site to learn more: [The People's Charter for an Eco-Social World](#) (IFSW, 2022).

This is another example of the social work profession in action at the international level. Like the developments following the Second World War that led to the development of welfare states and the United Nations, social workers in this era have initiated and are nurturing global change.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have briefly looked at the history of international social work, the current Definition of Social Work and ethical principles. We have seen a consistency of values from the beginning in 1928 through to today that has highlighted our role as facilitators and co-workers in social change. Also, we have seen that the profession is growing and expanding as more social workers from different parts of the world bring their contributions to help with global crises, and because world issues are rapidly changing, most notably the climate and the geo-political response to this, social workers have even more to contribute.

Becoming a social worker is a life-long process and we are always continuously learning – this is one of the wonderful aspects of being a social worker – it is never dull. There are no two families the same and therefore social work can never be formulaic and only apply one solution to different contexts. The descriptions and principles listed above therefore intentionally do not prescribe what you should do as a social worker. Moreover, they act as navigational 'stars' to help you find direction in your work. Metaphorically, this constellation of stars can be seen in every part of the world as they

have been co-built and endorsed by over 150 national associations of social work. Hopefully you find them useful in your practice.

## Further reading

Cox, D. & Pawar, M. (2006). *International social work: Issues, strategies, and programs*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Introduces an integrated perspectives approach, defined as one that blends globalisation, human rights, and ecological and social development theories. It then explores international social work with particular attention to poverty, conflict and postconflict reconstruction, and displacement and forced migration. Case examples enhance a practice emphasis.

Healy, L. (2008). 'International social work'. In *Encyclopedia of social work*, 20th ed., Vol 2. Edited by Terry Mizrahi and Larry E. Davis, pp. 482–488. New York: Oxford Univ. Press and National Association of Social Workers.

A brief (2,500 word) overview that focuses on the evolution of definitions of international social work and on current roles for social work in the international arena. The reference list gives suggestions for further reading. Useful as an introduction to the topic.

Healy, L. (2008). *International social work: Professional action in an interdependent world*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.

Provides a comprehensive introduction to international social work. Under the main themes of globalisation and professional action, the author covers theories underpinning international social work, history and current realities of the global profession, global ethics, global policy, and international practice.

Lyons, K. (1999). *International social work: Themes and perspectives*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.



This is the first well-known text on international social work. It defines the field and then addresses several topics as examples of international social work.

Lyons, K., Manion, K. & Carlsen, M. (2006). *International perspectives on social work: Global conditions and local practice*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

The authors begin with a sound and concise treatment of the relevance of globalisation to social work practice. They introduce the concept of loss as a universal social concern and apply this in later chapters to practice in situations of conflict, migration, child exploitation, and global pandemics.

Ramanathan, C. & Link, R. (1999). *All our futures: Principles and resources for social work practice in a global era*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

A comprehensive text with some particularly insightful chapters. The chapters on field education and the one on ethics are recommended in the sections on International Social Work Education: Curriculum and Field, and Values and Ethics, respectively.

## Teaching exercises

### (1) History of social work:

The aim of this exercise is to reflect on the history of social work in one's own context and to establish links to the international dimension of social work.

- Discuss the following questions:
  - What do you know about the history of social work in your country?
  - To what extent is the development of social work in your country related to the international development of social work?

**Lessons learned:** It is very useful to know the history of social work in your country. This knowledge and reflection might be useful as a starting point. We recommend putting this knowledge into context and reflecting on it from a postcolonial perspective.

## (2) Relevance of global social work for my practice:

The aim of this exercise is to identify and reflect on the relevance of the global dimension of social work in my own practice.

- Discuss the following questions:
  - To what extent is the international Definition of Social Work relevant for my own work?
  - Which principles are relevant for my work?
  - Where do I see challenges to apply them?

**Lessons learned:** It should prove useful to reflect and discuss the relevance of the global definition and the ethical principles for one's own practice.

## Chapter 2

### Global entanglements: Introduction to Postcolonial Theories and their Relevance for Social Work

By Eveline Amman Dula

#### Overview

This chapter demonstrates the relevance of postcolonial theories for social workers to overcome a western view of social work and to consider the historical, social and political contexts and interdependencies to be able to analyse international power relations and their relevance for social work. A key question considered here is: *“What are the key ideas of postcolonial theories and why are they relevant for social work in an international context?”*

Two central guiding ideas, the history of entanglement and so-called ‘othering’, are used to explain what is meant by postcolonial theories. From this follows the demand for a decolonisation of knowledge, which is currently also debated in social work under the keyword of indigenisation. This international debate is also relevant for social work in Switzerland in order to reflect historical and current structures of domination and power, which are often also shaped by colonial thinking.

## Learning Objectives

- To identify and to overcome a western view of social work.
- To analyse the relevance and impact of colonialism for social work today.
- To reflect international power relations and their relevance for social work.
- To identify power relations in social work in different contexts.

## Postcolonial theories – concepts of ‘othering’ and ‘entangled histories’<sup>5</sup>

Postcolonial theories include a broad spectrum of theoretical approaches. As a common feature, these approaches are concerned with the examination of historical and contemporary power relations that are related to the effects of European colonialism. The two guiding ideas of othering and the history of entanglement make it possible to situate local developments of social work in a global context and to show the relevance of the colonial past to reflect on current processes of power in social work.

The postcolonial perspective requires questioning social work’s involvement in colonial practices and discovering and acknowledging the diversity of methodological and theoretical development in social work in the South, as this has long been obscured by the dominance of Western approaches. Understanding this interwoven history allows us to understand the dominance of Western theories in the context of colonisation/decolonisation and trace its effects to the present day.

All forms of colonisation involve relations of domination, often enforced by physical and military force (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2005). Thus, in 1930,

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<sup>5</sup> This is a summary of the original article, published in German: Ammann Dula, Eveline; Dhananka, Swetha Rao (2023). *Postkoloniale Perspektive auf und für die Soziale Arbeit in der Schweiz* In: Piñeiro, Esteban; Kurt, Stefanie; Mey, Eva (Hg.) *Soziale Arbeit und Integrationspolitik in der Schweiz: Professionelle Positionsbestimmungen. Soziale Arbeit im Fokus*. Vol. 1 (S. 125-136). Zürich: Seismo Verlag.

European colonial powers owned 84% of the world's lands (Fieldhouse, 1989, in Tamburro, 2013). This process of material colonisation was legitimised as a 'civilising mission' (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2005). This gave rise to the notion of 'civilised Europe' and inferior 'others'. Postcolonial theories point to this persistence of colonial patterns of perception and thought, as well as to new processes of colonisation. This is reflected in the idea of the superiority of the West as the forerunner of global development and the conviction that it has reached this level through its own efforts – and not through the exploitation of colonies.

The prefix 'post' does not simply refer to the period after colonisation, but to the continued operation of colonialist structures in new forms (Purtschert, et al., 2012). These are firstly of a material nature and manifest themselves in the globally unjust distribution of power and resources. This can also be seen, for example, in the adoption of Western legal principles aimed at the exploitation and acculturation of the 'natives'. The second type involves the persistence of the idea of the superiority of 'whites', which was internalised on a political as well as an individual level. Postcolonial theorists ask self-critical questions about internal forms of domination and lingering processes of colonisation in the respective countries or societies (Schirilla, 2021). Applying postcolonial theories means identifying these legacies and pursuing the question of which injustices and social representations from the colonial period are still reproduced today.

Underlying Eurocentric assumptions are thereby challenged and motivations and values questioned, which are unreflectively applied to different social practices in mainstream discourse (Dittfeld, 2020). Despite these commonalities, postcolonial theories encompass different approaches and disciplines (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2005) and are therefore used here in the plural. This chapter focuses on two guiding ideas.

The first guiding idea of **othering** enables the analysis of the mutual constitution of representations of self and other in the context of structural

inequalities (cf. Mohanty, 1984; Said, et al., 1978). The premise of colonialism is based on the opposition between 'Us' and the 'Others'. The dominant 'Us' is seen as civilised, educated, technologically advanced, and spiritually enlightened. In contrast, the 'Others' are uncivilised, uneducated, and in need of rescue. To morally legitimise the acts of violence during colonisation, the indigenous population was denied humanity and labelled as the 'others' (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2005). Representations of self and other are related to power relations, exploitation, and hierarchies, which are stabilised by means of cultural representations, discourses and political control. However, these colonial power constellations can also be changed, for example through the development of empowering concepts of action (Bhabha, 2004).

The second guiding idea, **entangled histories**, calls for rethinking Western history in the context of colonialism and imperialism and opening the view to the multiplicity of entanglements through shared history, in order to conceptually recast past and present relations between Western and non-Western societies (Randeria, 2015). For example, Switzerland's 'guest worker' policy (so called *Saisonniers*), which aimed at the temporary availability of foreign labour and deliberately excluded the integration of immigrants, was closely interwoven with economic and political interests of the countries of origin (Ammann Dula, 2019). Randeria speaks of 'interwoven histories' as historical developments are mutually dependent. Postcolonial theories take seriously the challenge of transnational historiography and examine imperialism as an overall phenomenon (Jain, 2018). However, looking at interwoven histories does not mean that nation-states lose their importance. Even though nation-states stem from processes of construction, they are based on extremely powerful 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 2006) and nation-state determined and controlled practices such as border regulations, entry and expulsion procedures, or official procedures that are tied to nation-state criteria of distinction (Purtschert, et al., 2012).

Postcolonial theories therefore call for an examination of historical, as well as current, power structures based on colonial thinking, and are also relevant for countries like Switzerland, as this country was involved in colonialism, even without its own colonies.

## Social work and its colonial past in Africa

*“I grow-up with Ubuntu, but in my social work education the focus was on Western models of individualisation, so my practice of Ubuntu as a social worker has been covert, and I thought not of interest to the profession”.* This is a typical comment made by social workers across the African region, reflecting the experience of colonisation and the more recent aid mentality from the rich countries who exported individual methods of working which are not appropriate to other cultures. (Mayaka & Truell, 2021).

***Reflection: Where do the theories and methods of social work you know come from? What do you know about the history of social work in your country? What connections can you make to the colonial past?***

The development of ‘modern social work’ was entangled with colonisation on the African continent, related to the emergence of colonial social planning (cf. Spitzer, 2011). For the respective colonial administration, the implementation of social work was motivated by their own economic interests and the procurement (and preservation) of labour. However, the implementation of European welfare systems in the colonised territories were justified with ‘achievements of civilization’. Christian missionaries played a significant role in this process, laying the foundation for the introduction of Western-oriented education, health and social systems (Spitzer, 2011). This included, for example, the establishment of schools, training centres and hospitals (Mwansa & Kreitzer, 2012).

The links between the introduction of social services and colonial interests in Africa and the close interconnection with European developments can be

seen in, for example, Ghana. The Department of Social Services was established in 1946 to integrate World War II veterans into society who had lived abroad for long periods of time (ibid.). Similar institutions were also established in Botswana for war veterans. In Zambia, the introduction of social welfare was closely linked to the economic interests of the colonial powers: social services were introduced with the aim of promoting developments in the copper industry and safeguarding the well-being of workers in this growing industry. In South Africa, social work was used as a means to control the African population, who were seen as potential enemies of the state. Social services, in turn, were reserved for the 'white' population to guarantee their comfort and improve their quality of life. Overall, it can be stated that before the time of independence, social work, which was introduced by the colonial powers, served as a means of economic exploitation as well as social control (ibid.).<sup>6</sup>

The African independence movement in the 1960s was followed by the establishment of numerous educational institutions, sponsored by the United Nations. However, independence did not always lead to a break with the colonial knowledge and education systems. Thus, Western curricula were adopted in social work training centres. This was justified by the fact that this form of social work was also suitable for African settings (Mwansa & Kreitzer, 2012). However, this also sought to Westernise social work in Africa, in the belief of the superiority of Western knowledge over African forms of knowledge, which were devalued as 'primitive' (ibid.). This led to the training of African faculty in Europe and North America and the teaching of Western social work theories and methods.

This process was also referred to as "professional imperialism" (Midgley 1981) and was maintained until the 2000s. This can also be seen, for

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<sup>6</sup> The original article has been published in German here: Postkoloniale Perspektive auf und für die Soziale Arbeit in der Schweiz (hes-so.ch).



example, in the exchanges and trainings of the Association of Schools of Social Work in Africa (ASWEA), where only Western theories and methods were received (Mwansa & Kreitzer, 2012). Local organisations of solidarity in Africa, which were often based on family and kinship networks, were informalised and made invisible and did not receive recognition.

However, glimpses of documents from these trainings show that participants in the seminars criticised this Western-style social work and lobbied hard for the development of Afrocentric curricula in social work, which never materialised (ibid.). Despite this criticism, which has been evident since the 1980s, Western influence continues to this day in social work training institutions in Africa and leads to the teaching of “inappropriate and culturally alien qualifications” (Spitzer, 2011, p.1312).

#### **Case Study: ‘New Zealand’**

In past or currently colonised countries, indigenous social workers recognise that imported Western approaches to social work continue the colonial legacy and in effect act to deconstruct the indigenous culture with devastating effects on their people. In many of these countries, indigenous social workers have developed different applications of professional social work that are based on their cultural knowledge and act to support their cultural frameworks. Where this has been able to take effect, these approaches have had a significantly positive effect on indigenous peoples, communities and societies.

During the 1970s and 1980s in Aotearoa-New Zealand, for example, Māori social workers highlighted the significantly overproportionate rate of Māori children that were forcibly separated from their families and then institutionalised. This practice was based on colonial ideas of how a family should be composed, act and behave. From the colonial lens, if the child did not fit an English model of a family, then they were at risk of being placed in an institution or home – away from the love, care and protection of their kinship family. Consequently, large numbers of children grew up without the intergenerational knowledge and connection to their culture. Nor were they accepted

into colonial culture as it was inherently institutionally racist. Thereby many indigenous people of this era were alienated from their own and imported cultures even though they were born and lived in their own land.

Living life outside of the law was a natural result for many in this situation and one of the awful consequences was that this generation in Aotearoa-New Zealand subsequently became the most imprisoned race in the world.

To address this situation in part, Māori social workers led the development of legislation and nurtured it through the governmental processes until it became law. The 1989 Children, Young Persons, and their Families Act led to the implementation of 'Whanau Decision Making' or 'Family Group Conferencing', which aimed to incorporate strengthening the extended family, on its own cultural terms, and supporting it to realise its responsibility to provide the best care for its children. Pre-colonial cultural traditions were emphasised in this work which promoted wisdom, pride, belonging and citizenship as indigenous people.

The success of this approach was significant and the model was adapted in a number of other countries around the world. It has helped to break down the traumatic culture of removing children from their families and working with the families to restore their capacity to support each other and their communities or tribes, with the view that all members thrive.

***Reflection: How did social workers in Australia and Canada respond to the brutal colonial policies enforced for the assimilation of First Nation children? Did they comply or resist?***

## Conclusion

The twenty-first century is characterised by an unprecedented level of global interdependence, in which people, communities and their institutions are affected by transnational forces at multiple levels. From climate change to political and economic hardship, these realities have necessitated responses based on a growing awareness of people's entanglement

with one another, in the context of increased mobility. Despite this increasing awareness of global contexts, the question arises as to which regional, international and global power and hierarchy processes are relevant to local realities.

***Reflection: What insights or further questions arise when you look at social work in your context from a postcolonial perspective?***

The use of a postcolonial perspective enables social workers to understand the historical, social and political contexts and its interdependencies in their conceptualisation of the 'social environment' (Kang, 2013). It is important to ask how current local realities, marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion processes are linked to power hierarchies and how these are linked to historical developments.

***Reflection: How is social work interwoven in these structures of power and what role does it play today?***

Students of social work in Switzerland, for example, often combine international social work with the deployment of Swiss social workers abroad. Helping the 'others' is a central motif that is often linked to ideas of marginalised and disadvantaged others, influenced by a colonial perspective, who need to be helped and the assumption is that 'we' know how to help others. Postcolonial theories can be helpful here in deconstructing and contextualising the ideas of 'the others' and our own desire to 'help' and in distinguishing between unprofessional volunteer work or humanitarian aid and professional social work on the basis of the relevance of local or ethnic principles in social work. To consider indigenous knowledge in social work might also include taking into account systems of knowledge and solidarity of and among, for example, immigrants and to broaden the understanding of professional social work in Switzerland.

It is also about critically questioning one's own perspective, one's personal involvement in power structures and reflection of privileges. It is important to search for ways in which the principles of social work can be realised in the sense of empowerment and joint learning, by envisioning creative and empowering interventions that can be underpinned by relevant or indigenous knowledge systems (Noyoo & Kleibl, 2019, in Schirilla, 2021) and thus contribute to building an inclusive society (Kang, 2013).

## Further reading & videos

Dittfeld, T. (2020). 'Seeing White: Turning the postcolonial lens on social work in Australia'. *Social Work & Policy Studies: Social Justice, Practice and Theory*, 3(1), pp. 1-21.

Social work is a profession based on (white) Euro-American concepts, problems and historicity in which Indigenous knowledge and cultures are marginalised, and the effects of colonisation are obscured to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous social workers. To decolonise social work requires a critical understanding of the development of social work identity and ideology within the context of colonialism and postcolonialism. The article subsequently argues for the use of postcolonial theory to shift the focus from the effects of colonisation on Indigenous peoples to the colonial origin and continued coloniality of the social work profession, practice and curriculum within Australia. The purpose of turning the post-colonial lens on social work is to build an understanding from which social work can support the Indigenous struggle for self-determination, decolonisation and social justice.

[online]. Available at: [Seeing White: Turning the postcolonial lens on social work in Australia | Social Work & Policy Studies: Social Justice, Practice and Theory \(sydney.edu.au\)](https://www.sydney.edu.au/learning-centres/social-work-and-policy-studies/seeing-white)

Gray, M. (2013). *Decolonizing Social Work*. New York: Routledge.

Riding on the success of 'Indigenous Social Work Around the World', this book provides case studies to further scholarship on decolonisation. Decolonisation seeks to weaken the effects of colonialism and create opportunities to promote traditional practices in contemporary settings. In this volume, Indigenous and non-Indigenous social work scholars examine local cultures, beliefs, values, and practices as central to decolonisation. Supported by a growing interest in spirituality and ecological awareness in international social work, they interrogate trends, issues, and debates in Indigenous social work theory, practice methods, and education models including a section on Indigenous research approaches. The diversity of perspectives, decolonising methodologies, and the shared struggle to provide effective professional social work interventions is reflected in the international nature of the subject matter and in the mix of contributors who write from their contexts in different countries and cultures, including Australia, Canada, Cuba, Japan, Jordan, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa, and the USA.

[online]. Available at: [Decolonizing Social Work | Mel Gray, John Coates, Michael Yellow Bird, \(taylorfrancis.com\)](#)

Gray, M.; Coates, J. & Yellow Bird, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Indigenous Social Work around the World: Towards Culturally Relevant Education and Practice*. London: Routledge.

This book covers topics such as culturally specific practice models, education and training, and policy development in Indigenous social work. It includes contributions from Indigenous social work practitioners and scholars from various countries, providing insights into the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Indigenous communities in different contexts. The book aims to promote culturally relevant and appropriate social work practice that is grounded in Indigenous knowledge and values.

Kang, H.-K. (2014). 'Claiming immigrant cultural citizenship: applying post-colonial theories to social work practice with immigrants'. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 1(2), pp. 233-245.

This paper presents immigrant cultural citizenship as a conceptual frame for applying postcolonial theories to social work practice with immigrants, using a case study based on the author's practice as a social worker at a community-based social service agency in the US. Postcolonial theories may help social workers to critique marginalising discourses that often reduce the immigrant experience to acculturation, to critically reflect on their role in reproducing or contesting such constructions, and to imagine creative and empowering interventions. The case of Mrs Moon, an Asian immigrant elderly client with depressive symptoms, illustrates an application of postcolonial theoretical framework to social work practice that generated a critical and contextual assessment and multi-level interventions which made a transformative impact on the client and the social worker. The paper concludes with implications for postcolonial social work practice in the current climate of austerity and restrictive immigration measures.

[online]. Available at: [PDF Claiming immigrant cultural citizenship: applying postcolonial theories to social work practice with immigrants \(researchgate.net\)](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266111111)

Kleibl, T.; Lutz, R.; Noyoo, N.; Bunk, B.; Dittmann, A. & Seepamore, B. (Eds.). (2019). *The Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Social Work* (1st ed.). New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429468728>.

This handbook provides the reader with multiple new theoretical approaches and empirical experiences and creates a space of action for the most marginalised communities worldwide. It reflects on and dissects the challenging issues confronting social work practice and education globally in the postcolonial era. By analysing how countries in the so-called developing and developed world have navigated some of the inherited systems from the colonial era, it

shows how they have used them to provide relevant social work methods which are also responsive to the needs of a postcolonial setting. This is an analytical and reflexive handbook that brings together different scholars from various parts of the world – both North and South – to distil ideas relating to ways that can advance the social work of the South and critique the social work of the North in so far as it is used as a template for social work approaches in postcolonial settings.

Mohanty, C.T. (1984). 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses'. *Boundary 2*, 12/13, pp. 333-358.

In this essay, Mohanty critiques the political project of Western feminism and its discursive construction of the category of the 'Third World woman' as a generic, homogenous, victimised stereotype that Western feminists must save. Her paper was a key work, highlighting the difficulties faced by feminists from the Third World in being heard within the broader feminist movement.

Tamburro, A. (2013). 'Including Decolonization in Social Work Education and Practice'. *Journal of Indigenous Social Development*, 2(1), pp. 1-16.

Social service providers must support the recovery of Indigenous peoples from the effects of colonisation. Therefore, social work educators must help decolonise our profession. Indigenous North Americans, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians have experienced colonisation and its multigenerational impact. Without an understanding of the effects of colonisation, social workers, many of whom will work with Indigenous clients, will be less prepared to encourage positive change. A description of decolonising social work practice and education through the application of postcolonial theory and approaches is provided. This approach can also inform social work with African-American and Indigenous Hispanic peoples, since these groups have also been negatively affected by the oppression of colonisation. The focus of this discussion is the

application of postcolonial approaches to social work. The decolonisation of social work practice, through the incorporation of Indigenous worldviews into social work curricula, including knowledge, skills, and values, which are needed for effective provision of social services, is demonstrated through reforms to Indigenous child welfare services.

[online]. Available at: [Including Decolonization in Social Work Education and Practice \(hawaii.edu\)](https://www.hawaii.edu/socialwork/articles/104/)

## Videos

Flynn, C. *Introduction to Postcolonial Theory*, including ideas by Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha.

[online]. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TG1HL8h8aMM>

Waggeh F. *Africa Post-Colonial Development* at TEDxGallatin:

Fatoumata Waggeh is a graduate of the NYU Gallatin School of Individualised Study. Her studies focused on how historical processes and broad structure colonialism and neo-colonialism have manifested in African underdevelopment and its placement on the periphery.

[online]. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7lmz4UL4wE>

## Teaching exercises

### (1) Overview in Postcolonial theories:

The aim of this exercise is to familiarise with postcolonial theories and their most relevant implications.

- Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TG1HL8h8aMM>
- Discuss the following questions:
  - What are the key ideas of postcolonial theories?



- What is the relevance of postcolonial studies for social work in an international context?
- What is the relevance of postcolonial studies for social work in your country and/or for your work?

**Lessons learned:** It is very useful to know the main implications of postcolonial theories. It would be useful learning to consider the multiple perspectives involved and motivate the students to read more about them.

## (2) Application of postcolonial perspectives:

This exercise is about better understanding and applying the concept of ‘othering’ in relation to your own position and work as a social worker. The following questions can be reflected on individually and then exchanged in small groups or with a colleague or in a team.

- Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vF5M9Oeqbis>
- Discuss the following questions:
  - What does postcolonial theory help us to do?
  - What are the main premises of postcolonial theory?
  - What does it mean: ‘to other’ (other as a verb) / ‘othering’? Describe in your own words.
  - Who are ‘the others’ in your work? How can we overcome othering?
  - What is ‘internalised colonialism’? Describe in your own words.
  - To what extent are the persons you are working with concerned by internalised colonialism?

**Lessons learned:** ‘Othering’ is a very useful concept that is easy to understand and to use as a reflection tool for its own prejudices and implications in processes of inclusion and exclusion. However, these reflections can also trigger feelings of powerlessness and guilt. It is therefore important to reflect together on how ‘othering’ can be overcome.

### (3) Pick one postcolonial country and explicate the colonial legacies, in other words the colonial present:

- Select a particular postcolonial country (e.g. India)
  - Present the entangled history between the postcolonial country and the country in which you are learning or teaching. Generally interlinked trade relations are to be found or current manifestations of softpowers (i.e. cultural diffusion) can be identified. Discuss how this entangled history shapes their perspective of the postcolonial country.
  - Discuss the convergence of independence movements in postcolonial countries and the establishment of the Bretton Woods institutions in the wake of the Cold War that established a new world order. Whereas Europe was assisted with the US-crafted and financed Marshall Plan, postcolonial countries were left to their own devices after centuries of exploitation by colonial powers. Relate that world order to continued differential pathways of postcolonial and colonial countries in terms of their human development rankings (as identified by the UNDP).
  - Discuss concrete colonial legacies, such as the adaptation of the British political, legal and education system in India and the cultural norms imposed on Indian culture.
  - Based on the book *Politics of the governed* by Partha Chatterjee, present the particular state-citizen relations forged in postcolonial countries and attempt to situate social work as you know it in the country you are teaching.

**Lessons learned:** Social work students are often not very familiar with international power structures and its impacts on local developments. Therefore, it might be important to explain and discuss their mechanism and relevance of the Bretton Woods institutions. Depending on the context, other international power relations and institutions might be important to consider.

## Chapter 3

# United Nations, Human Rights, and their Importance for Social Work

By Pascal Rudin

### Overview

In this chapter we look at the United Nations (UN) and its importance to social work. The profession of social work has a long history of participating in and influencing the work of the United Nations and its affiliate agencies, almost since the inception of the institution (Mama, 2015), but also the UN was very important for the spread of professional social work (Healy, 2008). This history includes not only the work of social work as accredited non-governmental organisations like the three leading social work organisations with consultative status – the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW received consultative status in 1947), the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW received consultative status in 1959), and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW received consultative status in 1972), but also of individual social workers who were trailblazers in the field of international work (*ibid.*). Our focus is on important UN instruments such as the human rights treaties, and their interdependence with and significance to social work. Following this, we briefly examine the representation of social work at the UN and consider the role of social work.

*Reflection: What do you know about the UN and its importance for social work? To what extent might the UN or its instruments be relevant for your social work practice?*

## Learning objectives

- To consider the relevance of the UN for social work.
- To know the main UN bodies and their significance for social work.
- To be aware of the key UN instruments concerning human rights.
- To understand the ways in which social work engages with the UN.

## The United Nations

The United Nations (UN) is an international governmental organisation founded in 1945 after the Second World War to promote international cooperation and prevent future conflicts. While headquartered in New York, the UN maintains a significant presence in Addis Ababa, Bangkok, Beirut, Geneva, Nairobi, Santiago and Vienna and has offices around the globe. With 193 member states, the UN is a forum for countries to come together and discuss issues of global concern. The UN serves as a platform for countries to coordinate their policies on a range of issues, including climate change, poverty reduction, human rights, humanitarian affairs, international law, security and economic development. Through its various bodies and programs, the UN provides a space for countries to work together towards common goals, fostering collaboration and promoting multilateralism.

The UN has several key bodies, including the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the International Court of Justice, and the Secretariat. Each body has a specific mandate and responsibilities within the organisation. The UN's work is guided by the principles of the UN Charter, which include highlighting respect for human rights,

promoting social progress and better standards of living, and promoting peaceful resolution of conflicts. Over the years, the UN has played a key role in addressing global challenges such as poverty, climate change, and armed conflicts. Despite facing criticisms and challenges, the UN remains one of the most important international organisations for promoting global cooperation and addressing global issues.

## Relevance of the UN to social work in the past and today

The UN was an important contributor to the spread of professional social work throughout the world in taking the responsibility of starting schools of social work in a number of countries. The Social Commission of the Economic and Social Council encouraged attention to the training of social workers and provided support for technical assistance in social welfare. They initiated a series of studies and publications, such as the *First United Nations Survey on Social Work Education* in 1950 and asked in 1959 for the participation of social workers in the preparation and application of programs for so-called “underdeveloped countries” (Healy & Hall, 2007). Many countries received assistance in establishing social work training and the UN also published a *Manual for Schools of Social Work and the Social Work Profession* (1992 and 1994). However, the social work trainings were strongly influenced by a western understanding of social work, not sufficiently taking into account local forms of solidarity and social welfare, and have also been critiqued as representative of imperialistic social work (Gray, 2005).

***Reflection: To what extent has the social work education program in your country been influenced by these developments?***

Social work today focuses on improving the well-being of individuals, families, and communities, and shares many of the goals and values of the UN. One of the most significant areas of overlap between the UN and social work is in the promotion of human rights. The UN has established several mechanisms to promote and protect human rights, including the Office of the

High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Human Rights Council, and the International Criminal Court. Through these mechanisms, the UN monitors and reports on human rights abuses, investigates and prosecutes perpetrators of human rights violations, and provides support to victims of human rights abuses. The UN's work on human rights has helped to promote greater respect for human dignity and to hold governments accountable for their actions. Joining forces, social work has long been grounded in the principles of **social justice and human rights**, which are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As noted, the UN has been a leader in promoting human rights globally with various initiatives and its work on human rights aligns with social work's focus on promoting equality, social justice, and respect for human dignity.

Another area where the UN and social work intersect is in **promoting sustainable development** and addressing global challenges such as poverty, inequality, and climate change. The UN has established several programs and initiatives to address these challenges, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs provide a blueprint for countries to achieve a more sustainable and equitable world by 2030, through actions such as eradicating poverty, improving education, and reducing carbon emissions. They are closely aligned with social work's emphasis on addressing social and economic inequalities and promoting sustainable development (IFSW, 2021). Social work practitioners can contribute to the achievement of the SDGs by working with communities to address poverty, promote education, and protect the environment as the IFSW policy paper on SDGs outlines.

Additionally, the UN's work on **peace and security** is highly relevant to social work. The UN Security Council, the UN's main body for maintaining peace and security, has the authority to authorise the use of force and deploy peacekeeping missions to conflict zones. Social workers are often called upon to work with individuals and families affected by conflict and violence. These missions and other initiatives aimed at preventing and

resolving conflicts can help create more peaceful and stable societies, in which social workers play a key role.

Finally, the UN is important for providing **humanitarian assistance** to people affected by conflicts, disasters, and other crises. Through its various agencies, such as the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN provides critical assistance to people in need around the world. This assistance includes food, shelter, healthcare, and other essential services, and helps to alleviate the suffering of millions of people affected by crises. Social workers play a crucial role in delivering humanitarian assistance by providing psycho-social support, advocacy, and other services to those affected by crises and supporting them to be able to make self-determined decisions. More recently, however, the social work profession highlighted that crisis response must move beyond humanitarian aid (see, for example, [social work’s role in co-building dignified options with Ukrainian refugees](#)).

*Reflection: Which of these themes are relevant in your social work practice or social work education?*

## Challenges and criticism

The UN is not perfect and faces many challenges and criticisms. Some of these include its lack of representation and democracy in some of its organs (such as the Security Council), its inability to enforce its decisions and resolutions in some cases (such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), its bureaucracy and inefficiency in some of its operations (such as peacekeeping), its dependence on voluntary contributions from member states (which affects its budget and resources), and its susceptibility to political influence and manipulation from powerful states (which affects its impartiality and credibility). Despite these limitations, the UN remains a vital and indispensable institution for global governance and cooperation in the 21st century.

From a social work perspective, the United Nations has been criticised for its top-down approach that is sometimes perceived as being disconnected from the needs and realities of local communities. [The People's Charter for an Eco-Social World](#), previously discussed in Chapter 1, highlights this critique by calling for a more participatory and democratic approach to decision-making. Social work, as a profession that is grounded in the principles of social justice and human rights, has a strong commitment to working with and for marginalised communities and, as such, places great importance on ensuring that these communities have a voice in shaping policies and programs that affect their lives. While the UN has made efforts to involve civil society and grassroots organisations in its work, more needs to be done to ensure that these voices are heard, and that the organisation truly reflects the needs and aspirations of the people it serves.

*Reflection: What instruments of the UN do you know and might be relevant for your social work practice?*

## Important UN instruments: Human Rights

Human rights are a fundamental part of human existence, and they form the basis of a just and equitable society. Human rights are the basic rights and freedoms that are accorded to all human beings, regardless of their race, gender, religion, nationality, or any other status. They are universal, indivisible, interdependent, and inalienable. This section will discuss the concept of human rights, the importance of human rights, and some of the key human rights instruments that have been established to promote and protect human rights around the world.

Human rights are often defined as the basic rights and freedoms that all people are entitled to by virtue of their humanity. These rights are inherent to all human beings and cannot be taken away or denied by any individual or government. Human rights include civil and political rights, such as freedom of speech, the right to a fair trial, and the right to participate in



government. They also include economic, social, and cultural rights, such as the right to an education, the right to health care, and the right to work.

The importance of human rights lies in their ability to ensure that all individuals are treated equally and with dignity and respect. Human rights protect individuals from discrimination and arbitrary treatment, and they provide a framework for individuals to live free and fulfilling lives. When human rights are respected, individuals are able to participate fully in society, access education and healthcare, and pursue their own goals and aspirations. The global Definition of Social Work mentions human rights in this way: “...Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work...” (IFSW, 2014).

There are several human rights instruments that have been created to protect and promote human rights at the international level. These include the following:

- International human rights law was born with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, the first document in history to set out fundamental human rights. The UDHR, together with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and its two Optional Protocols, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, form the so-called [International Bill of Human Rights](#) (OHCHR).
- [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#): This is a non-binding declaration adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. It sets out the basic human rights and freedoms that are inherent to all individuals, such as the right to life, liberty, and security of person, freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and the right to work and education.
- [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#): This is a legally binding treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in

1966. It sets out the civil and political rights that all individuals are entitled to, such as the right to freedom of expression, the right to a fair trial, and the right to vote and participate in government.

- [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#): This is a legally binding treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1966. It sets out the economic, social, and cultural rights that all individuals are entitled to, such as the right to work, the right to education, and the right to an adequate standard of living.

There are two types of human rights monitoring mechanisms within the United Nations system: treaty-based bodies and charter-based bodies. The ten human rights treaty bodies, made up of committees of independent experts, monitor implementation of the core international human rights treaties. The charter-based bodies include the Human Rights Council, Special Procedures, the Universal Periodic Review and Independent Investigations. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) provides expertise and support to all the different mechanisms.

These instruments are critical in promoting and protecting human rights around the world, and they provide a framework for nations to establish legal and policy mechanisms to ensure that human rights are respected and protected. While there is still much work to be done to address human rights violations and promote greater respect for these fundamental rights, these instruments provide an important foundation for creating a more just and equitable world, but are in IFSW's view not sufficiently 'people-friendly' to engage with (Dhananka, et al., 2023).

***Reflection: Which treaties and instruments might be relevant for your social work practice? How can you make use of them?***

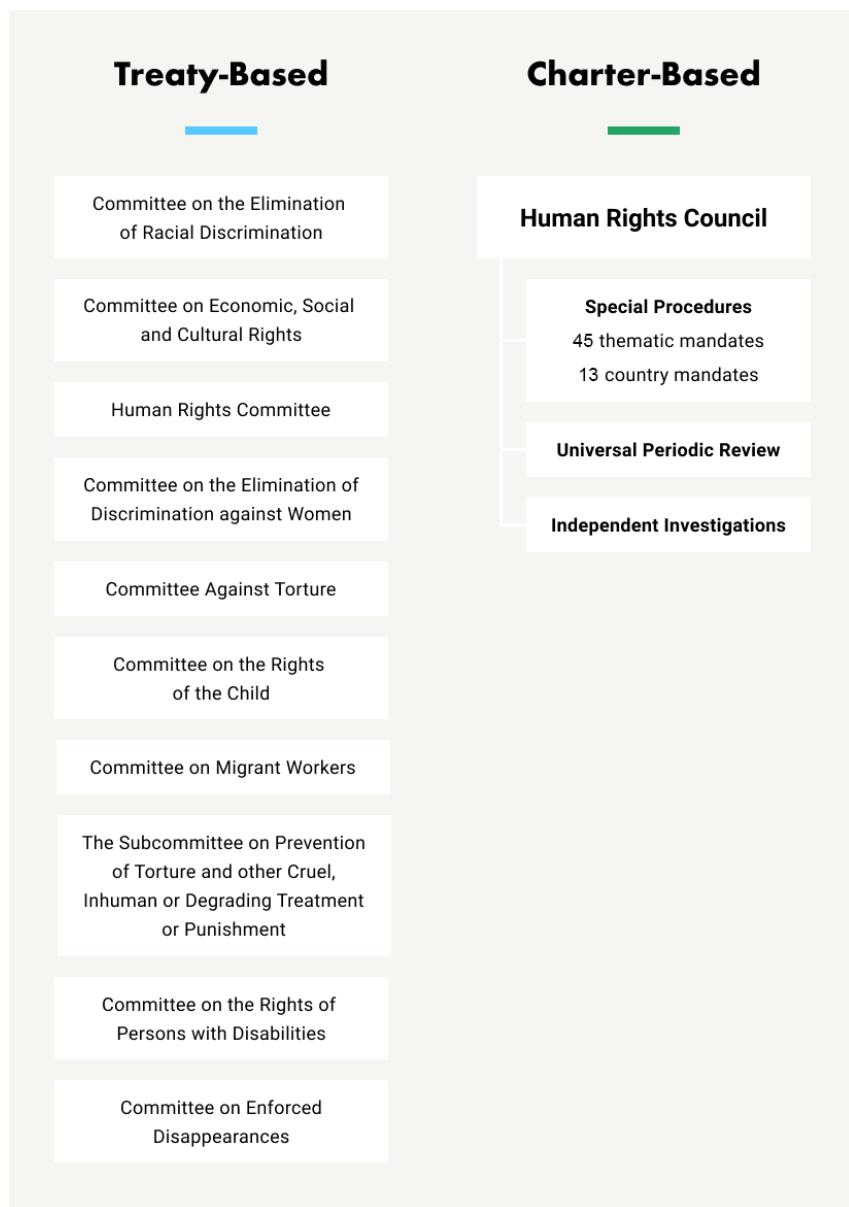


Figure 1: UN Human Rights instruments and mechanisms. Source: OHCHR [online]. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-and-mechanisms>.

## Human rights and their relevance to social work practice

Human rights are central to the practice of social work because they provide a framework for promoting and protecting the dignity, equality, and well-being of all individuals. Many even call social work a ‘human rights profession’. Social work, being a rights-based profession, has a responsibility to uphold human rights in its practice, as well as to advocate for those whose rights have been violated. For example, when someone is homeless a charity-based approach might be grounded in a moral imperative to help the homeless. A needs-based approach might insist on meeting a basic human need of shelter. Whereas a human rights approach will frame the situation as a violation of the human right to adequate standard of living (UDHR, Art. 25). Framing homelessness as a human rights violation, makes it claimable in courts in many countries.

*Reflection: Which kind of human rights violations do you or do your clients experience? How can the issues you deal with in your professional routine be reframed as human rights violations?*

Here are some reasons why human rights are important to social work practice:

- **Human dignity:** Human rights promote the inherent dignity of every individual. Social workers are committed to promoting respect for individuals and their right to self-determination. The principle of human dignity is the foundation of social work practice and is reflected in the profession’s Code of Ethics.
- **Social justice:** Human rights are closely linked to social justice, which is a fundamental value in social work practice. Social workers strive to create a society that is fair and just for all individuals, regardless of their race, gender, sexuality, or other characteristics. Human rights help social workers to identify and challenge systemic inequalities and to promote the rights of marginalised communities.

- **Empowerment:** Human rights promote empowerment by providing individuals and communities with the tools and resources they need to advocate for their own rights. By empowering individuals to participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives, social workers can help to promote social justice and equality. (This is explained further in Chapter 4).
- **Advocacy:** Social workers have a responsibility to advocate for the rights of their clients, particularly when those rights have been violated. Human rights provide social workers with a framework for understanding and addressing issues of social injustice, and for advocating for policy and systemic changes that promote human rights.
- **International standards:** Human rights are enshrined in international law, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Social workers can use these international standards to inform their practice, and to hold governments and other institutions accountable for upholding human rights.

Human rights are not just moral or ethical guidelines but are also codified as laws that most countries have agreed to uphold. For instance, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is a legally binding international treaty ratified by almost all countries. Social workers can use the CRC as an **advocacy tool** to promote and protect the rights of children, including the right to education, healthcare, and protection from violence and exploitation. They can also work to ensure that policies and practices are inclusive and participatory, giving children a voice in decisions that affect their lives.

Human rights being universal, national constitutions of democracies incorporate these principles and the ratified conventions into their local legal framework. UNDHR Articles 22-27 are especially relevant to social work,

these outline the individual's economic, social and cultural rights, including healthcare. They uphold an expansive right to an adequate standard of living and make special mention of care given to those in motherhood or childhood.

While acknowledging the importance of human rights, social workers have recently asked for a more holistic rights framework, which has been highlighted in a recently adopted policy of IFSW. It states that the Holistic Rights Framework recognises individual human rights, (dignity and fundamental freedoms), social-human rights, (civil, economic, and political), cultural rights, eco-system rights, and the broader rights of nature. Within this framework are driving values and principles: recognising the importance of diversity, sustainability, self-determination, and that all people are responsible to protect and advance the rights of others as well as nature (see IFSW policy paper on [The Role of Social Workers in Advancing a New Eco-Social World](#). (IFSW, 2022).

Balancing all rights through participatory engagement, the holistic rights framework seeks to achieve a consensus on how to establish inclusive policies and practices towards building a new eco-social world that leaves no one behind. You will learn more about it in Chapter 6 on eco-social social work.

### Example – UNCRPD – “Nothing About Us Without Us”

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) that came into force in 2008 is an important example of how such an international convention was shaped through a bottom-up movement that embraced the principle of self-determination (part of social work's ethical principles) through the incorporation of the slogan “*nothing about us without us*”, sparked from the US civil rights movement that emphasised: “*when others speak for you, you lose.*”

Disability has traditionally been widely viewed as a failing on the part of the individual, as a personal tragedy and as a burden on the rest of society. In Western societies, disability has been described in terms of medical or biological deficit as a cause of functional limitation. As a result, disabled people are often considered to be one of the most oppressed groups in society. Through a realisation that their needs were not met, nor were they participating in society with equal rights, a movement formed.

In 1980, 400 people gathered for the formation of DPI (Disabled People's International), a human rights organisation committed to the protection of disabled people's rights and the promotion of their full and equal participation in society. The mandate was to be the direct voice of disabled people across the world. Through their collective force they managed to overthrow the dominance of a medical conception of disability in favour of a social conception of disability.

The notion of independence was also nuanced from a perspective of disability to mean 'self-determination, control and managing and organising any assistance'. DPI is an activist-oriented organisation and has since lobbied both governments and the United Nations and has more recently been largely instrumental in the drafting of the UNCRPD. One of the most significant aspects of the UNCRPD is that for the first time the people who were the target group of the Convention, that is disabled people, were directly involved in its drafting. This experience was directly incorporated as one of the most fundamental principles of the Convention, that is, disabled people's participation in decision making. For further reading, see ['Nothing about us without us: disabled people determining their human rights through the UNCRPD'](#) (Callus & Zahra, 2017).

***Reflection: How would you use human rights as an advocacy tool in your practice?***

## Representation of Social Work at the United Nations

Social work is a profession that seeks to improve the wellbeing of individuals, families, groups, and communities through a range of activities, including advocacy, policy development, and direct practice. As previously noted, one of the primary ways in which social work is collaborating with the UN is through its organisations which were granted **consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council**: the International Association of Schools of Social Work (1947), the International Federation of Social Workers (1959) and the International Council on Social Welfare (1972). The social work profession is recognised as an important stakeholder in the development of UN policy and programs and is active in promoting social work values and principles in UN forums, including the Commission for Social Development and the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

Collaboration between social work and the United Nations has increased in recent years as both entities work towards common goals related to social justice, human rights, and sustainable development. IFSW has formally established a [UN commission](#) to represent the voice of social work at the UN and to expand its collaboration with various UN bodies. Representation has expanded to include **social workers from all IFSW regions at the UN** offices in Bangkok, Geneva, Nairobi, Santiago, New York and Vienna.

IFSW organises side events as well as an annual Social Work Day at the United Nations in Geneva and New York that seek to be a bridge between the UN and social work, as well as the wider public. This includes providing input into the development of UN policy and resolutions, as well as advocating for the inclusion of social work perspectives in UN decision-making processes. IFSW also collaborates with other UN agencies, such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), to promote social work values and principles in their work.



One of the key issues that IFSW addresses at the UN is the promotion of social justice and human rights, making the profession known and inviting UN agencies to partner with social work associations and its members. IFSW recognises that social work is a profession that is dedicated to advancing human rights and social justice, and therefore seeks to promote these values at the UN. This includes advocating for the rights of vulnerable and marginalised populations, such as children, women, refugees, and people living in poverty. IFSW also promotes the use of a human rights-based approach in social work practice, which emphasises the importance of empowering individuals and communities to claim their rights and take control of their own lives.

Another key issue that IFSW addresses at the UN is **sustainable development**. IFSW recognises that social work has an important role to play in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which is highlighted in its 2021 policy [Social Work and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#). IFSW advocates for the inclusion of social work perspectives in the implementation of the SDGs, particularly in areas such as poverty reduction, health promotion, and gender equality. The impact of IFSW's work at the UN has been significant. By advocating for social work values and principles at the UN, IFSW has helped to raise the profile of social work on the global stage. This has led to increased recognition of the important role that social work can play in promoting social justice, human rights and sustainable development. IFSW's engagement with the UN has also helped to shape UN policy and resolutions, particularly in areas related to social development and social welfare.

Collaboration between IFSW and the UN has several **benefits**. As the policies of the UN are top-down instruments it is critically important that social workers and community leaders provide a bottom-up approach. This can sometimes work as a pincer manoeuvre forcing governments to change or create laws to meet the needs of populations or the whole of society. Social work also complements UN strategies such as the Sustainable

Development Goals. These goals are lofty and may not make a lot of sense in communities. For example, goal number 1, 'Eradicate Poverty'. In communities how does that work, what role does the community play, what role should the government play?

While these are very complex questions, social workers often are aware of how to generate answers. For example, in many countries social workers utilise community development approaches when assessing the skills and resources within a community. Very often they identify that people know how to cook or sew or fix cars for example. The social workers then promote family or community business development and help the community members to develop and action business plans. This can transform the lives of people that live in poverty. Our experience is that once a family and community realise their own power, they keep on addressing many strategies to make poverty a thing of the past. Children start going to school, community violence is highlighted and reduced, and people start to demand their rights. It has been said by various UN leaders, there cannot be the SDGs without social workers on the ground, and they are absolutely right.

The relationship between IFSW and the UN allows social work to be represented at the global level and ensures that the perspectives of social workers are considered in the development of policies and programs. It further provides social workers with opportunities to engage with other professionals and organisations, and to learn from best practices around the world. Finally, it strengthens the social work profession, by promoting the value and importance of social work within the global community.

While collaboration between social work and the UN has many benefits, there are also several challenges and opportunities. One of the main challenges is the limited resources available to both organisations. Social work is often undervalued and underfunded, which can make it difficult for IFSW to effectively advocate for the profession within the UN system. Similarly, the UN faces a range of funding and resource challenges, which can make it

difficult to implement policies and programs effectively. Despite these challenges, there are also several opportunities for collaboration. For example, IFSW can work with the UN to develop new initiatives and programs that promote social justice, human rights, and sustainable development. IFSW can also collaborate with other NGOs and community organisations to leverage resources and expertise, and to maximise the impact of their work.

### **Case Study: 'Advocating holistic approaches to children's well-being'**

In my work (i.e. Pascal) as a member of the IFSW UN Commission and a Representative to the UN in Geneva, I have engaged with multiple UN bodies, including the Human Rights Council and the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CoRC), to advocate for environments that support children's holistic development and well-being. A key focus of my advocacy has been to challenge the growing trend in many countries where social problems are increasingly being individualised and medicalised. This trend is particularly evident in the rising prescriptions of psychotropic drugs to children, a practice that raises significant concerns about the potential violation of the right to health as outlined in Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

The issue of over-medicalisation is especially pertinent in the context of the diagnosis and treatment of what is commonly referred to as 'Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)'. In my experience, the increasing rates of ADHD diagnoses and the corresponding rise in the prescription of psychotropic medications reflect a broader societal tendency to address complex social and behavioural issues through a medical lens rather than through more holistic, supportive interventions. This approach risks marginalising children by reducing their experiences to a medical condition that must be treated, often without considering the broader social, educational, and familial contexts that contribute to their behaviour.

From a social work perspective, this trend is deeply troubling because it undermines the fundamental principles of social justice, human rights, and the holistic well-being of the child. Social work, as a discipline, emphasises the importance of understanding individuals within their broader social

environments. It advocates for interventions that address the root causes of social issues, rather than merely treating symptoms. In the case of ADHD, this means looking beyond the child's behaviour to consider factors such as educational pressures, family dynamics, and social inequalities that may be contributing to the child's difficulties.

My advocacy work has highlighted how the medicalisation of childhood behaviour, particularly through the lens of ADHD, can lead to the marginalisation of children. This marginalisation is not only a violation of their right to health but also of their right to participate in all matters affecting them, as enshrined in Article 12 of the CRC. Too often, decisions about treatment and intervention are made without meaningful input from the children themselves, further disempowering them and ignoring their capacity to contribute to discussions about their own lives.

As part of my advocacy, I have worked to bring these concerns to the attention of various UN bodies, resulting in several countries, including Switzerland, being critiqued for their practices. The critiques have focused on the need to re-evaluate the approaches to diagnosing and treating ADHD, encouraging a shift away from a predominantly medical model towards one that incorporates social work principles. This includes advocating for greater use of non-medical interventions, such as counselling, family therapy, and educational support, which can address the underlying social and environmental factors contributing to a child's behaviour.

My research has further supported this advocacy by providing evidence of how children are being sidelined in these processes. The discourse surrounding ADHD often frames children as 'problems' to be fixed, rather than as individuals with their own voices, rights, and perspectives. This not only impacts their mental and physical health but also their sense of agency and their ability to participate fully in society. My work aims to shift this discourse, promoting a view of children as active participants in their own lives who should be supported in ways that respect their dignity and rights.

In summary, my ongoing efforts at the UN are focused on ensuring that social work perspectives are integrated into international policy discussions, particularly those related to children's rights and health. By advocating for

approaches that consider the whole child within their social context, I aim to contribute to the development of policies and practices that truly support the well-being and development of all children, rather than resorting to medical solutions that may ultimately do more harm than good. For a more in-depth exploration of these issues, my work on the discourse analysis of childhood ADHD in Switzerland offers insights into the implications for social work and the importance of challenging the prevailing narratives that shape how we understand and respond to children's needs. To learn more about this perspective, see [Helping the 'problem child' become loveable again? A discourse analysis on childhood ADHD in Switzerland and implications for social work.](#) (Rudin, 2020. p.281ff).

***Reflection: What messages would you bring to the UN that you think are missing and important for them to know?***

## Conclusion

Summing up, consultative status with the UN provides an opportunity for social work organisations to represent the social work profession's perspective on social development at the global level. One of the key values of social work is working with people bottom-up rather than top-down and fostering a co-working partnership with people and their communities. This approach is crucial to ensuring that policies and programs meet the needs of the people they are designed to serve. Consultative status with the UN allows social work organisations to engage in dialogue with governments, UN agencies, and other stakeholders to advocate for policies that are grounded in the realities of people's lives.

We have explored the nature of the United Nations, its significance to social work, and how consultative status may be used to promote social work's understanding of social development. While there are many challenges and much criticism around the UN, social workers acknowledge the importance of human rights in working with marginalised populations. Through the

'People's Charter for an Eco-Social Work', social work alongside many other professions have highlighted the need to work on a grassroots level rather than top-down. Using a holistic rights framework, people can build networks, exchange knowledge and ideas, and collaborate on projects that promote social, economic, and environmental justice.

***Reflection: What messages would you bring to the UN that you think are missing and important for them to know?***

## Further reading

Ife, J. (2012). *Human rights and social work: Towards rights-based practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This book explores the intersections between human rights and social work practice and argues that social workers have a responsibility to promote and protect human rights, and that this requires a shift towards a rights-based approach in social work practice. The author provides a theoretical framework for understanding human rights and their relevance to social work, and then explores practical examples of how social workers can incorporate human rights principles into their work with individuals, groups, and communities.

Lyons, K. & Manion, I. (2010). 'The relevance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to social work practice'. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32(2), pp. 252-259.

This article discusses how the UNCRC can inform social work practice in areas such as child protection, education, and participation. Overall, the article highlights the importance of incorporating a human rights perspective into social work practice, particularly in relation to children and young people. The authors argue that the UNCRC can serve as a useful tool for social workers to promote the

rights of children and young people, as well as to hold governments and other actors accountable for upholding those rights.

Weiss, T. G. (2017). *The United Nations and Changing World Politics*. New York: Routledge.

This book provides a comprehensive analysis of the United Nations' evolution in response to changing global political landscapes and new emerging challenges. The book explores the role of the UN in promoting international cooperation, maintaining peace and security, and fostering sustainable development. It also critically examines the UN's limitations, challenges, and prospects for reform.

Weiss, T. G. & Daws, S. (Eds.). (2020). *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This book provides a detailed overview of the United Nations (UN), its history, its current structure, and its various organs and agencies. The book consists of thirty-five chapters, covering topics such as the history of the UN, the role of the Secretary-General, peace-keeping operations, human rights, development, and the UN's relationship with other international organisations.

## Teaching exercises

### (1) Social work and the UN:

The aim of this exercise is to reflect on the history of social work in one's own context and to establish links to the international dimension of social work.

- Discuss the following questions:
  - What do you know about the history of social work in your country?
  - To which extent are human rights referred to in social work practice in your country?

- If you were an IFSW UN commissioner, what issues from your context would you like to have voiced in forums like the Human Rights Council, what elements would you include in a 2-minute statement to the Council?

**Lessons learned:** It is very useful to know the history of social work in your country. This knowledge and reflection might be useful as a starting point. We recommend putting this knowledge in a next step into context and reflecting on it from a postcolonial perspective.

## (2) Social work and human rights:

The aim of this exercise is to reflect the use of human rights in social work practice, and to identify possible challenges to this use and strategies to overcome them.

- Discuss the following questions:
  - **Human dignity:** Is there a situation in your working context where human dignity is called into question? How might social workers use human rights or international standards to address this situation?
  - **Social justice:** How might human rights help social workers identify and challenge systemic inequalities and promote the rights of marginalised communities? Are there any situations you are aware of, where social workers strive to create a society that is fair and just for all individuals, regardless of their race, gender, sexuality, or other characteristics?
  - **Empowerment:** Do you know of situations in which human rights were used to promote empowerment by providing individuals and communities with the tools and resources they need to advocate for their own rights? How could this be done?
  - **Advocacy:** Do you know situations, where social workers advocated for the rights of their clients? Where do you see



a need for doing so? Do you have ideas how this might be done?

- **International standards:** Do you know of situations in which social workers used these international standards to inform their practice, and to hold governments and other institutions accountable for upholding human rights? How could this be done?

# Chapter 4

## Empowerment

By Eveline Amman Dula

### Overview

The concept of empowerment is very important for social work in an international context. It is mentioned in the international Definition of Social Work released by the IFSW and the IASSW in 2014: “*Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and **the empowerment** and liberation of people*” (IFSW, 2014).

Empowerment is a key concept in social work as it relates to the nature of the relationship between social worker and the client, group, organisation or community they are working with, where self-chosen and self-directed goals are seen to be of paramount importance. The emphasis on empowerment is the result of the longstanding and wide endorsement of the concept in social work practice as central to editions of social work texts published over the last three decades such as Adams (1990, 2008); DuBois & Miley (2014); Kam (2021).

*Reflection: What do you understand by empowerment? How do you define empowerment as a method for social work in your context?*

## Learning objectives

- To define empowerment as theory and method for social work related to creating the conditions for participation.
- To specify different forms of power.
- To relate empowerment to participation on different levels and processes.
- To describe its relevance for social work in an international context.

## Origins of the term/concept

The term 'empowerment' has been used liberally in the English-speaking world since the 1970s, including in the fields of social services, social psychology, public health, adult literacy, and community development (Simon, 1994).

Since the 1990s, the concept has also gradually become established in the international gender and development agendas and has found its way into the new credo of international development agencies on poverty reduction (Calvès, 2009). Generally used in combination with other buzzwords such as 'community', 'civil society' and 'agency', the term 'empowerment' is now central to the rhetoric of 'participation of the poor' in development (ibid.). It resonates with the social work ethical principles of self-determination, participation and treating people as a whole<sup>7</sup>.

***Reflection: What do you know about the origins of empowerment and its use in your context?***

The term 'empowerment' has numerous origins and sources of inspiration leading to different definitions and understandings of the concept. For

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<sup>7</sup> [Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles](#) (IFSW, 2018).

example, empowerment can be defined as being able to maximise the opportunities available for individuals (Rowlands, 1995). In this very individual and neo-liberal definition, power structures are not considered, therefore a wider definition would see empowerment defined as processes by which people become aware of their own interests and how those relate to the interests of others, in order both for them to participate from a position of greater strength in decision-making and actually to influence such decisions.

Consequently, empowerment must include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy the decision-making space in order to overcome internalised power structures. It must involve undoing negative social constructions so that the people affected come to see themselves as having the capacities and the right to act and influence.

Using empowerment as a key concept in social work, its origins in diverse fields such as feminism, Freudian psychology, theology, the Black Power movement, and Gandhism (Simon, 1994; Cornwall & Brock, 2005, in Calvès, 2009) need to be taken into account. Since the 1970s publication of *Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities* by Barbara Solomon, the term has been used also in social work.

According to Calvès (2009) the early theories of empowerment developed in the United States were rooted in a philosophy that prioritised the viewpoints of oppressed peoples, empowering them not only to express themselves, but also to gain power and overcome the domination to which they were subjected (Wise, 2005 in Calvès, 2009 p.1), inspired by the Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire developed in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published in 1968. According to Freire (1974), in any society a small number of people exercise domination over the masses, resulting in a 'dominated consciousness'. Freire wanted to start processes towards 'critical consciousness'. Thanks to active teaching methods, individuals become aware of their own situation, of themselves as "subjects," so that they can be given the "tools to

make choices” and become “politically conscious” (Freire, 1974, in Calvès 2009, p.3). In the context of various social protest movements, the term is increasingly used in research and interventions related to marginalised groups such as African Americans, women, the LGBTQ community, and people with disabilities.

According to Calvès (2009) the feminist movement in the Global South can be credited with the formal appearance of the term ‘empowerment’ in the field of international development. For example, in *Women’s Empowerment in South Asia: Concepts and Practices*, Indian researcher and activist Srilatha Batliwala defines empowerment as a process of transforming the power relationships between individuals and social groups. Batliwala (1993) argues that power relationships can only be changed through action on three different fronts: by questioning the ideologies that justify inequality (such as social systems determined by gender or caste), by changing the means of access and control of economic, natural, and intellectual resources, and by transforming the structures and institutions that reinforce and preserve existing power systems (such as family, the state, the market, education, and media). Joining Batliwala and other feminists, such as Naila Kabeer (1994); Magdalena León (1997), Jo Rowlands (1995), in Calvès 2009, these authors emphasise the multifaceted nature of the empowerment process for women in the Global South and developed theories on the links between empowerment and power.

### Forms of power

Rowlands (1995) emphasises the importance of defining the notion of power and its different forms in empowerment processes. She argues that some confusion arises because power is understood and experienced in differing ways by different people and that persons might even not be aware of the potential of misunderstanding.

Power has been the subject of much debate across the social sciences. Some definitions focus, with varying degrees of subtlety, on the availability of one person or group to get another person or group to do something against their will. Such 'power' is located in decision-making processes, conflict, and force, and could be described as 'zero-sum': the more power one person has, the less the other has. Some frameworks also do not mention how power is actually distributed within a society and are not considering power dynamics of gender, or of race, class, or any other force of oppression (ibid.).

Conventionally, power is defined in relation to obedience, or '**power over**', since some people are seen to have control or influence over others. A gender analysis shows that 'power over' is wielded predominantly by men over other men, by men over women, and by dominant social, political, economic or cultural groups over those who are marginalised. It is thus an instrument of domination, whose use can be seen in people's personal lives, their close relationships, their communities, and beyond. Power of this kind can be subtly exercised.

People who are systematically denied power and influence in the dominant society internalise the messages they receive about what they are supposed to be like, and how they may come to believe the messages to be true. This 'internalised oppression' is adopted as a survival mechanism, but becomes so well ingrained that the effects are mistaken for reality. Thus, for example, a woman who is subjected to violent abuse when she expresses her own opinions may start to withhold them, and eventually come to believe that she has no opinions of her own. When control becomes internalised in this way, the overt use of 'power over' is no longer necessary (ibid.).

From a feminist perspective, interpreting 'power over' entails understanding the dynamics of oppression and internalised oppression. Since these affect the ability of less powerful groups to participate in formal and informal decision-making, and to exert influence, they also affect the way that

individuals or groups perceive themselves and their ability to act and influence the world around them.

There are other forms of power, where power is not a 'zero-sum': an increase in one person's power does not necessarily diminish that of another. Some people have the power of stimulating activity in others and raising their morale. One aspect of this is the kind of leadership that comes from the wish to see a group achieve what it is capable of, where there is no conflict of interests, and the group sets its own collective agenda. It is this form of '**power to**' that the term 'empowerment' refers to, and it is achieved by increasing one's ability to resist and challenge 'power over' (Rowlands, 1995).

Empowerment is thus more than simply opening up access to decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy that decision-making space, and so overlaps with the other categories of '**power to**' and '**power from within**' (ibid.).

*Reflection: When am I myself in a situation of power or disempowerment? To what extent does this influence my attitude and my work as a social worker?*

### Levels and forms of empowerment

Solomon examines the mechanisms of power and powerlessness on the basis of the life situation of Black communities. The psychological foundations of the empowerment paradigm are discussed on the basis of negative myths about the African-American population (cf. Solomon, 1976). In doing so, she makes the inner-American discourses on power and racism accessible to social work. She does not see her empowerment concept limited to US-American Black citizens, as phenomena of powerlessness affect all minorities who are negatively evaluated and stigmatised by the majority

society. In all societies and their support systems, power relations prevail that have an impact on the psyche of the individual.

If the person belongs to an underprivileged minority, they are usually confronted with negative evaluations by the majority society. Discrimination becomes a structural experience of exclusion. If the person can no longer protect themselves against devaluation or defend themselves against discrimination, the negative attributions seep as a creeping poison into their self-image. This will have an impact on their life and their social environment, but also on the resources they can use to empower and liberate themselves from both their negative self-image and their social situation. (Blank, 2018).

Social workers aim to help liberate persons in this situation: *“Empowerment is a process in which social workers or other professional helpers are involved in a set of activities with clients with the aim of reducing the powerlessness caused by the experience of discrimination and belonging to a stigmatised group. These activities are specifically designed to counteract such negative evaluations”* (Solomon, 1976, p.29).

Therefore, empowerment is a multilevel concept that impacts individuals, organisations, communities, and societies (Blank, 2018) and interventions should address this at different levels. This includes at individual level (corresponding to the process of assimilation of power by a person or a group), organisational level (referring to the appropriation of power by an organisation in which a person, group or other organisation is empowered) and at the community level (corresponding to the appropriation of the community by the collective) (Cavaliere & Almeida, 2018).

At the **individual or personal level**, awareness of one’s own powerlessness may make one more likely to work to increase one’s power. For Solomon, it is therefore important to shift the emphasis of psychosocial treatment from the psyche to the social needs. This is particularly important for persons



whose negative valuation has ensured relative deprivation as regards access to social resources. Specific interventions should aim to reduce the feelings of powerlessness and increase feelings of control over decisions affecting one's life (Solomon, 1987). Empowerment on that level is about developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the effects of internationalised oppression (Rowlands, 1995).

On a **group or organisational level**, close relationships are very central, as empowerment is about developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of the relationship and decisions made within it (ibid.).

On a **community level**, individuals' work can reach a more extensive impact than each could have had alone. This could also include involvement in political structures or other forms of collective actions based on cooperation rather than competition. Activities may be focused locally at villages or at neighbourhood level, but also address institutions or organisations at national or international level (ibid). At a higher level, the legal and social aspects of oppression can lead to social and political change. Formal empowerment emerges when institutions present mechanisms that influence public decisions that concern citizens and their social institutions, creating new opportunities for citizens to participate in decision-making processes (Cavaliere & Almeida, 2018).

Although a distinction can be made between different levels and forms of empowerment, it is essential to focus on the goal of empowerment, namely, to enable more decision-making opportunities and participation in society. To achieve this, it may be necessary to work on different levels at the same time.

*Reflection: Where do you see opportunities and needs to apply empowerment in practice? Which forms and levels should be approached and with what goal?*

## Processes of empowerment

Empowerment can be described as a process that includes internal change (a person's or group's sense or belief in their own capacity to make decisions and resolve their own problems) and external change (finding expression in the capacity to act and to implement practical knowledge, information, skills, capabilities and other new resources acquired during the process). Both levels are connected as an interactive process that involves the individual or group and their environment.

These processes need personal resources and the development of critical awareness is an essential component which in practice is considered the product of a dialectic between action and reflection and comprises three paths according to Cavalieri & Almeida 2018, p.179:

- (1) development of a collective awareness in which the individual is not the only person to have a problem
- (2) development of social consciousness, that is to say, social and collective problems are influenced by social organisations
- (3) development of political consciousness within the mind-set that the solution to problems requires social change.

In this respect, empowerment is considered as a process which aims to strengthen a group's capacity to make intentional choices and to transform these choices into actions and produce the results desired by the individual. It then becomes necessary to examine not only the capacity to act but also the prospects for transforming the choices into results (Albuquerque, Santos & Almeida, 2016 in Cavalieri & Almeida, 2018).

For more details on the approach, it is useful to consider the process of empowerment (Peeters, 2012:12):

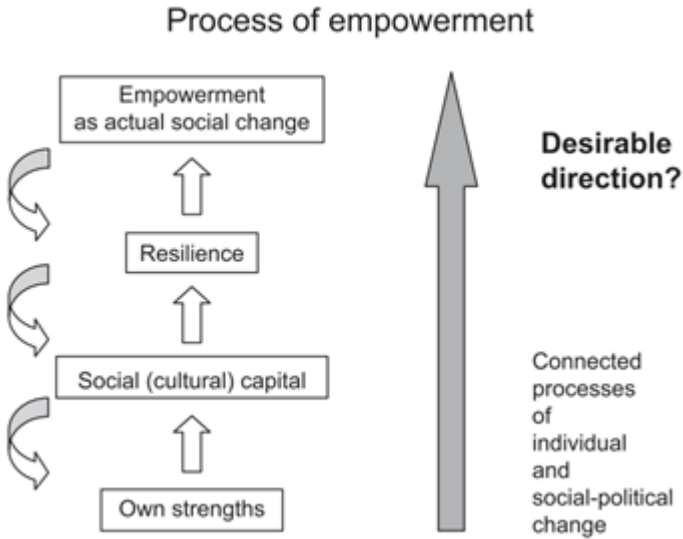


Figure 2: Process of empowerment (Peeters, 2012:12)

While Peeters (2012) describes the process of empowerment to enable change, it is important to ask what kind of change empowerment is directed towards. For Rowlands (1995), real empowerment may require taking unanticipated directions that the client or group concerned has decided to take. Therefore, professionals should be clear that any ‘power over’ which they have in relation to the people they work with is likely to be challenged by them (ibid.). This raises an ethical and political issue: if the reality is that you do have ‘power over’ – as is the case with statutory authorities or financially powerful organisations, such as development agencies – it is misleading to deny that this is so. Making clear the power dynamics that you as a professional are operating under to the people you are working with is ethically the right thing to do.

### **Case Study: 'Zambia'**

Empowerment is a core word in social work and also a contested one. Sustainable social transformation and development is rarely achieved by one person or entity giving power to another. Almost always it is a result of people working together to find solutions for themselves and developing partnerships with others (sometimes governments or social services) to support their self-determination. Social workers often find themselves in the middle, facilitating this co-working relationship. Some of those social workers have stopped using the word 'empowerment' and rather talk of 'mutual-empowerment' based on partnerships that support self-led development.

The people of Zambia receive minimal or no financial health or educational support from their government. Funds from UN agencies don't find their way to the streets where there is no fresh running water, nor toilets. For many people, the only money that contributes to survival comes from what can be grown, made and sold. It is an environment the UN would describe as extreme poverty. An added complexity that communities and social workers face is from HIV/AIDS. It is reported that in Zambia the HIV prevalence rate among females aged 15-59 years is 14.6%. This results in thousands of children being abandoned at a graveyard, at the door of a church, or found by social workers begging in the streets. For many their mothers and fathers have died, and as happens in so many cities around the world, the children have lost contact with their extended relatives when their parents moved from the countryside to search of a better life.

Social workers in Zambia, however, have found ways to effect sustainable change that gives the children and their extended families a much higher level of life quality and a significantly more positive future. One of several examples is the Empowerment Village in Lusaka. Social workers arranged for a section of unused land to be established as a permanent home for the village. It is situated close to some street markets on a busy road linking Lusaka (the capital city) with other main towns. On this land, the extended families of children, whose parents have died, are invited to live with the child in a self-led and self-supporting community. The community has a charter that gives all residents rights and responsibilities, but the charter starts by outlining all

the residents' joint responsibility, that 'All Children have the Right to Be Loved'.

The village started with only social work support and a vision, but within a short time, maize crops were established, and a milling machine purchased. The economic strategy was then widened to produce both meat and vegetables for sale. As funds were produced, the residents decided to build a medical facility which is staffed once a week. A doctor and nurse can treat illness and injuries as well as advise on nutrition. Social workers also assisted the villagers in establishing a school for the children which meets the requirements and standards of the national curriculum and a pension scheme for community members that are not able to work due to illness or injury. After six years the Empowerment Village has grown to include 140 families, and the model has spread to other towns and cities. The once-orphaned children now have the opportunity to gain higher levels of vocational training or university education, and above all, each of the residents has a robust social network of support and a sustainable future.

Truell (2017)

### Critical reflection: Empowerment in international cooperation

Although the term empowerment has been used more and more in international cooperation, it has been increasingly used in an individual and depoliticised form, reduced to an economic dimension. Empowerment was originally conceived as a strategy in opposition to the mainstream top-down development model; it is often used by international organisations as a means to increase efficiency and productivity while maintaining the status quo. (Calvès, 2009).

According to Calvès, even though the collective dimension of power is emphasised, such as community-based projects and the participation of civil society, these are reflecting a 'romantic' vision of local and community-based power that **neglects or ignores internal power relations, conflicts,**

**and social inequalities** (Wong (2003); Cling, Razafindrakoto & Roubaud (2002), in Calvès, (2009).

According to Calvès, postcolonial feminists have shown that institutionalised empowerment programs for women are often characterised by an essentialism. Particularly women from countries in the South are often viewed as a single homogeneous, monolithic category. These programs disregard the diversity of power relations that exist within this group of women (Mohanty 1984; Ferguson 2009 in Calvès 2009). Institutionalised **empowerment programs often neglect the 'intersectional' nature of power**, particularly the ways in which racism, social class, and patriarchy interact. In doing so, they risk reinforcing or creating social inequality within groups of women.

These programs often benefit only the women who are least marginalised. In Latin America, indigenous women's organisations such as the Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Rurales e Indígenas (ANA-MURI) in Chile, the Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Indígenas (CONAMI) in Mexico, and the Association of Black Women in Brazil also criticise the complete disregard for the voices of indigenous women, rural women, and women of African descent in institutionalised empowerment programs (Bodur & Franceschet (2002); Sánchez Néstor (2005); Calvès (2009).

Also in social work, the **neo-liberal appropriation of the empowerment** idea manifests itself in the uncritical reinterpretation of self-empowerment into self-optimisation in the service of an "entrepreneurial self" (Bröckling, (2007), in Blank (2018), p.331). That results in a lack of interest in the causes of power asymmetries but in a focus on individual- and socio-psychological effects. The causes of distress and the powerlessness of the recipients of help is individualised, thus reinforcing the powerlessness of the recipients of aid (Blank (2018). Social work failed to use structural or macro intervention methods to assist service users in realising empowerment and to advocate for social change and justice (Olson, 2007.

*Reflection: What project or programs do you know, that might benefit from the notion of empowerment? How is empowerment defined in these projects and in what relations does it stand to the principle or definition of social work?*

## Conclusion

Empowerment is a key concept and method of social work on a world-wide level to address social inequalities and power structures and promote social change and participation. To apply empowerment in practice implies that social workers in this context become facilitators; anything more directive is seen as interfering with the empowerment of the people concerned (Rowlands, 1995). Therefore **facilitation skills** are very important and require subtlety in order to be effective, this has usually meant that professionals must to some extent re-learn how to do their jobs, and develop high-level skills of self-awareness. In some cases, the professional facilitator has to become a member of the group and be willing to do the same kind of personal sharing as is encouraged from other participants (ibid.).

*Reflection: In which situations am I able to take on the role of facilitator? What do I need to do this?*

## Further reading

Freire, P. (2005), (1970). *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum. [Pédagogie des opprimés suivi de Conscientisation et révolution. Paris: François Maspero. 1974].

Paulo Freire developed an approach to education that links the identification of issues to positive action for change and development. While Freire's original work was in adult literacy, his approach leads us to think about how we can 'read' the society around us.

Jönsson, J. (2010). 'Beyond empowerment: Changing local communities'. *International Social Work*, 53(3), pp. 393-406. [online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872809359867>

Interesting and critical reflection about the use and implementation of empowerment in the international context.

Kabeer, N. (1994). *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*. London: Verso.

Naila Kabeer has further developed and made practically operational the concept of women's empowerment advancing the global gender equality agenda by revealing ways in which social efforts, policies and poverty reduction programs promote or prevent the agency and voice of women.

Rowlands, J. (1995). 'Empowerment Examined'. *Development in Practice*, 5(2), pp. 101-107. [online]. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4028929>.

Rowlands emphasises the multifaceted nature of the empowerment process for women in the Global South and developed theories on the links between empowerment and power. Useful documentation: [Empowerment – Introduction to Community Psychology \(rebus.community\)](#)

Simon, B. (1994). *The Empowerment Tradition in American Social Work: A History*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Solomon, B. (1987). 'Empowerment, Social work in oppressed communities'. *Journal of Social Work Practice: Psychotherapeutic Approaches in Health, Welfare and the Community*, 2(4) pp. 79-91. [online]. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02650538708414984>

About the origins of empowerment in social work developed in the US in the context of oppressed communities.



## Teaching exercises

### (1) Analyse empowerment projects:

This exercise is about applying empowerment as an analytical framework to analyse already existing projects.

- Look for a project dealing with empowerment – for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zxb7GdyoAil> and discuss the following questions:
  - What kind of power is addressed in the project (Rowlands, 1995)?
  - To what extent does the project address the different levels of empowerment?
  - What processes of empowerment are relevant?
  - How might we improve the project?
  - Can you identify the learnings and messages for social work?

**Lessons learned:** It might be helpful to choose a project/example to analyse, where you find a lot of information to reflect on and try to apply the concept of empowerment.

### (2) Empowerment in practice:

This exercise is about applying the theoretical considerations on empowerment to your own practice.

- Think about an issue that is occurring in your community. Describe the issue:
  - What is the issue?
  - Who is involved?
  - What forms of power are relevant (cf. Rowlands, 1995)?
- How might you address the issue?
  - What levels of empowerment you might address first?

- With whom you might work? What persons or already existing groups would be important to involve?

**Lessons learned:** It might be useful to work in small groups first, as the questions are quite personal and it is necessary to discuss them in a trustful atmosphere.

### (3) “Privilege test”:

The aim of this exercise is to reflect your own position in society and its impact for social work practice. The following questions can be reflected on individually and then exchanged in small groups or with a colleague or in a team.

- What is your position in the context you are living and working – regarding gender, race, class, religion etc.?
  - Have you experienced inclusion or exclusion because of your own or attributed characteristics regarding gender, race, class, religion etc.?
  - Do you have experience in empowerment/disempowerment?
  - What forms of power do you have?
- What situation have you received through your background/birth?
  - To what extent have you achieved a (better/worse) position in society due to this?
  - What was helpful in this process (of privileging or disadvantaging you)?
  - What was difficult in the process?
- To what extent have these experiences influenced your interest in social work?
  - To what extent do you feel social work can be of value in resolving the situation you find yourself in?
  - To what extent do these experiences flow into the social work you use?

- Try to explain your current positioning in society using postcolonial theories.

**Lessons learned:** Students' positions and experiences are often very different – and so are the sensitivities associated with them. Especially students in privileged positions are often not aware of their situation and can react insensitively and incomprehensibly. Therefore, it is important that students first talk to a person they trust as this should provide support and reassurance while they consider difficult issues that they may not have been aware of previously.

# Chapter 5

## Community work / Community development

By Swetha Rao Dhananka

### Overview

From the global perspective, community work / community development is the predominant practice approach in social work throughout the world. This may come as a surprise to many reading this chapter, as looking at the major social work journals and the profession's academic books and curricula globally, community work is often described as just one of the fields of practice, alongside psychiatric social work, case management and so on.

Although marginalised, community work has relevance for two reasons:

- 1) Social work education has been intellectually colonised by European and Anglo-American schools of thought and this has inhibited local traditions of community-centred care and solidarity to enter local social work curricula (Muñoz Arce, 2015; Mishra 2021). Consequently, social work practitioners learn social work intervention methods conceived for a more western context, focusing on the micro-level of individuals. As this is not coherent with realities on a community level, practitioners have to unlearn and re-appropriate intervention rationales that are congruent with local values and traditions (Mayaka & Truell, 2021).

- 2) Community work is often the only lever for social protection and well-being in countries where the share of informal employment can range between 20% to over 90% (ILO, 2018). Those engaged in formal employment may often only be a very small percentage of the total working population. This is an important factor to consider, as welfare and social protection systems are often modelled around contributions from the formal economy. Where these contributions are partial or negligible, the capacity of welfare and social protection systems are weak, minimal, non-existent or failing. In the absence of those systems the major resources are 'people in the communities' and social workers need to work with existing informal solidarity systems in place that involve communities to create and strengthen mutual support systems to prevent or manage social and economic challenges. This context applies to about 70% of the world's population.

Compounding the disproportionate focus of the profession's journals is that social workers from contexts where community work is the norm often have no paid time to contribute to the development of the global – or even the local – profession. Very often these social workers hold more than one job as they are only a marginal step away from poverty themselves. Furthermore, in some countries, the international Western-focused social work literature in journals is simply seen as irrelevant to the work that they undertake.

## Learning objectives

- Understand the relevance of community work/development in an international context.
- Familiarise with important definitions, principles and modalities of community development.
- Acknowledge and develop curiosity of non-western 'cosmovisions' and their notion of community.
- Consider the steps involved in building a community development initiative.

## Conceptual and methodological bases for community development

### Definition of community

Defining community in the context of community development requires a broad definition that includes place-based, interest-based and other forms of new and emerging communities, for example groups that traverse physical boundaries and relate with unknown people in diverse locations.

For an explanation as to what constitutes a community, three theoretical approaches point to community as the structure of relationship through which people meet daily and provide care and support requirements (i.e. **human ecology** approach). The **system theory** approach sees community as the amalgamation of different subsystems to achieve community goals, whereas the **social interaction** approach views community as a structure of relations that function on the basis of social interaction, which may be grounded in shared identity (for example place, ethnicity, culture, interest etc.) and this fosters solidarity (Goel, 2014).

For communities to function and achieve their goals, physical resources such as places that are symbolically important and strengthen identity formation are constitutive and so are people's relationships, networks and the trust in those relationships to strengthen social capital (Klinenberg, 2020). Communities grounded in trust relationships and making use of physical resources provide a sense of belongingness.

Another ingredient to foster this sense of belonging is the recognition of the right to free expression and participation of those who are excluded, according to Yuval-Davis (2006). To belong also means to maintain a certain boundary between 'us' and 'them'. Hence formation of attachment to a community to which a sense of belonging is developed can be both inclusive and exclusive. An inclusive sense of belonging occurs through the performative free expression and participation of those who belong and a recognition

and acceptance by the community of those previously excluded (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

The main focus of the community development approach is on facilitating interactive processes between concerned members of the community and relevant actors to take autonomous decisions on addressing their individual needs and problems that are a reflection of underlying structural issues (Goel, 2014).

The aim of community development is to facilitate the process of finding collectively solutions to problems, often at a structural level that are experienced individually. The role of the social worker is to facilitate the process. As the main focus of community development is to assist communities to take autonomous decisions and to promote collective action, the social worker in a role of facilitation should see to, as far as possible, that conditions of equality to participate in the interaction and any decision-making required are available. While the social worker is the expert on the facilitation process (modalities, opportunities and limits to participation, procedural knowledge to deal with relevant actors), he/she engages with the wisdom of community members having lived through the problem and utilises or devises community development methodologies pertinent to the context to assist them.

The practice of community development should be guided by its goal and the ethical principles of social work. Social work being a human rights profession, Ife and Fiske (2006) argue that leaving responsibilities for human rights solely with nation-states and legal systems reinforces an elitist discourse of rights and leads social workers into an over-legalistic approach with focus on legislative change. Rather, they highlight the interactive component of human rights. Rights only exist when there are people in interaction, where rights and responsibilities are collectively realised and acted out. This suggests that rights make sense within a community, in which

their own rights and the rights of other communities are respected, leading to a recognition of the need for collective structures.

While human rights mechanisms are generally carried out in a top-down manner, articulation with bottom-up community development intervention is needed if we are to proactively address intersectional disadvantage and inequalities, in which the lived experience of human rights violation at an individual or community level can be put forward. In this sense the human rights approach offers a practical framework for guiding social work practice in general and community development in particular.

Community development is unique and contextual and needs to be situated in the local environment with facilitation by the social worker. As it collectivises a problem and attempts to develop agency within the community to convert individual grievances to claims to collectively find solutions, community development can be inherently political in nature.

These are suggested iterative steps to community development. Some important questions to consider are indicated for each step:

**1. Create a community:**

- Consider the common identities, goals and physical resources
- How does the selected community (and its leaders) relate to its members?
- Which approach would be most inclusive?
- Some possible tools and methods: be culturally sensitive and inclusive; communication is needed through traditional and virtual means; mobilise in places and times when the community usually gets together.



## 2. Collective diagnostic:

- Is there a collective conscientisation of the problem?
- What are the lived experiences of the problem? How are the diverse perceptions negotiated within the community?
- Which kind of power constellations need to be considered?
- Some possible useful tools and methods: Street theatre for conscientisation, storytelling, participatory cartography, community meetings, world cafés, transect walks, etc.

## 3. Elaboration of an action plan:

- Based on the collective diagnostic, what kind of solutions are feasible (actors, financial and time resources, skills)?
- Do they have procedural knowledge required for the action plan?
- What level of participation can be envisioned (participation ladder)?
- What existing skills and resources can be already mobilised within the community?
- What are the risks? What are the opportunities?
- Some possible useful tools and methods: ABCD Asset Based Community Development (see <https://resources.de-paul.edu/abcd-institute/resources/Pages/tool-kit.aspx>).

## 4. Realisation of the action:

- Do members respect the resources?
- What about leadership?
- Consider carefully how to work with traditional community leaders.
- Is the community able to own-up to the process and the outcomes?
- What is the impact of the action emotionally?
- What are conflict management strategies?
- Some possible useful tools and methods: Tools of change management.

## 5. Monitoring and Evaluation:

- Were goals of the community achieved?
- Who are winners / losers?
- What are follow-up steps? Can the outcomes of the action be institutionalised?
- Some possible useful tools and methods: Tools of Developmental evaluation by Patton (2011).

These iterative steps compel a professional disposition away from the social worker as an expert to the social worker as a facilitator who recognises the expertise of the lived experience in the participants of the community development intervention.

The issues of community integration, feeling safe in your neighbourhood, experiencing a sense of belonging in your street, suburb or town, and being respected, are securities which are fundamental to human enjoyment. They are much more likely to be achieved through community work, rather than individualised services. So, let's take a look at an inspirational example of social work approaches to community work in the context of a natural catastrophe that we can learn from:

### **Case Study: 'The Philippines'**

The Philippines have taught us a lot about the benefits of community work following a terrible typhoon in 2013. The insights we have gained stem from the social work responses on two different islands, one where community work was able to be evolved and the other where social work was, by a political directive, focused to maintain an individualistic approach.

A week or so before the typhoon the meteorologists had warned the country that they were expecting the biggest storm since storm-recordings had begun more than 100 years ago. Preparations were made across the country which comprises many small islands where people make a living by fishing or growing vegetables. The United Nations describe these communities as living in

absolute poverty as there are few opportunities for children to attend school, no formal healthcare services and income largely depends on the fishing conditions.

On one island, Tacloban, social workers encouraged people to go as far inland as possible. They also arranged with a wealthy Filipino, who had a holiday home on the island made of concrete, that locals could seek shelter in her three-story house. Then the storm came.

A new meteorological term was invented as a result of this typhoon: 'storm-surge'. This described how the sea is lifted by the wind and like a tsunami, washes over the land. 80% of life was lost in Tacloban and in other small fishing islands as the 550 kilometre per hour winds caused the sea to rise. In the three-story concrete house, the water first flooded the ground floor causing people in absolute panic to fight their way up to the already crowded second floor. The water kept rising.

I was told this by a social worker about two and half months after the typhoon. He was still traumatised. He was in the concrete building and managed to live by jumping into the waves from the third story then clinging to the top of a lamppost. The surviving social workers showed me the tents supplied by the UN and country aid agencies. They were erected on top of the rubble that used to be their homes made out of bamboo and old corrugated iron. The locals complained of the smell because the bodies of the loved ones were still lying in the layers of mud, wreckage, and debris under their feet. Every day one of the UN trucks came at midday to hand out food and water while the people waited, lost in their trauma, wondering what would become of them.

The Tacloban social workers who survived had attempted to work with the authorities who were responsible for the clean-up. The person overseeing this process was the island mayor and he chaired the strategic committee which comprised overseas aid and UN agencies. The mayor was not interested in social work and could not see its relevance to his task in feeding the survivors. Eventually he gave them a job to help people to claim their identity papers as all such things had been washed away.

Another island, Coran, suffered the same devastating effects as Tacloban, but witnessing both islands it was very difficult to believe. The rubble caused by the sea-surge has been removed. The marketplace has been rebuilt. The surviving residents were building housing and for the first time ever, a school.

I asked the local social workers, *“how could this be?”*. Having come straight from Tacloban, it seemed impossible. They explained that the day after water drained back into the sea, the local mayor called a meeting of the police, engineers and social workers. She said to the engineers, *“I need a report on which roads can be repaired and how long it will take”*. To the police, *“I need you to stop child traffickers taking advantage of our vulnerability”* and to the social workers, she said, *“I need you to assess who in the community can be a part of the rescue and recovery team”*.

The social workers responded, *“Yes Mam, of course, but we have two things to ask of you. We know that many outsiders will come to help in the next weeks, but can you give us assurance that any decisions made about the survivors will include them in the decision-making process?”*. The mayor nodded and social workers went on, *“Mam, in rebuilding from this catastrophe, can we try to make things better than they were before, to lift the standards of people’s lives?”*. The mayor agreed.

On hearing this, I was acutely aware of the powerful social work principles that were advanced and accepted. *“So, what happened next?”*, I asked. The social workers explained that within a few days a number of international agencies turned up with budgets and proposals. Their idea was to provide humanitarian aid, as I had noticed in Tacloban. But the social workers intervened with the support of the mayor. They proposed that the funds be used to employ the resident survivors so that the rubble could be removed while also bringing an income to the people. It was agreed that all the residents could earn the equivalent of US\$5 per day. This was an undreamed-of fortune for the people who had made their living by fishing. For the international agencies, it hardly scratched their budgets.

After the rubble was removed and the dead buried, an argument developed between one of the international agencies and the residents. The agency wanted the people to rebuild their villages inland on the island, away from the sea in case another typhoon should come in the future. The islanders

responded, *“We are not so foolish, we know that soon you will stop paying us \$5 per day and then we have nothing, if we cannot return to fishing. To fish, we must live by the sea”*.

The social workers encouraged the people to stand up for their views and keep talking with the international agencies. After two weeks a compromise was found. An inlet bay was identified with quick access to higher ground, and it was agreed that the new village could be located in this place. One of the international NGOs showed the people how to build permanent housing and construction started quickly using timber and other materials from the forests on the island. This time there would be no ramshackle bamboo and old corrugated iron informal settlement.

By the time I arrived, the villagers were constructing a school. They had never had one before and came to ask for my help. *“We have to employ a teacher”, they said, “what qualities should we look for in a teacher?”*.

Having spoken with survivors on both Tacloban and Coran, it was clear that there were significantly less trauma symptoms of the people who had been exposed to the community work approach, even though both islands suffered the same devastation. As a social worker I have seen this many times, when people are active in their own recovery and the recovery of others, they are more healthy and more able to identify solutions.

The social workers on both islands were capable, wonderful community-minded people, but this example highlights that when the authorities allow a community work approach to unfold the outcomes are significantly different. A year after my visit, I was told that the people of Coran had stopped being paid the \$5 per day and they had already rebuilt their new houses, school and fishing boats. Their local economy was booming as tourists had started to return and they were very happy with the teacher they had employed. Back on Tacloban, a year later, the people still lived in the tents on the rubble and waited every day for the humanitarian aid truck to come at midday.

***Reflection: What community work projects are you aware of where you live? What issues do you think could be solved by a community work approach?***

In the following segments we present two indigenous ‘cosmovisions’ that incorporate the community in their understanding of life and being, which have been diffused through the International Federation of Social Workers. Cosmovisions are composed of beliefs, knowledge, values and practices that form a worldview that allow cultures to conceive, perceive and interpret the world and its place within it. Community development in contexts in which these cosmovisions are lived, is a social work intervention that is coherent with local values and cultures.

## Ubuntu and social work

‘Ubuntu’ was the global theme for the social work profession in 2021. It was a turning point in social work as it was the first time an indigenous word was used in this the highest level of global messaging. This segment presents Ubuntu as a philosophy of social development that can strengthen social work theory and practice in its global aims of supporting community systems of social protection and social justice (Mayaka & Truell, 2021).

There are different African language groups that are used to describe Ubuntu. Internationally however, the term Ubuntu is the most well-known. It was popularised by Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu as a philosophy to guide the South African Truth and Reconciliation process following the end of apartheid. Mugumbate & Chereni (2019) have described how the common concept of Ubuntu has historically spread across sub-Saharan Africa and how it is termed slightly differently throughout the different regional languages. We focus here on the central commonalities of Ubuntu philosophy from across the region. Ubuntu perceives an authentic individual human being as part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental, and spiritual world (Mayaka & Truell, 2021).

Ubuntu as a philosophy is based on generic life values of justice, responsibility, equality, collectiveness, relatedness, reciprocity, love, respect, helpfulness, community, caring, dependability, sharing, trust, integrity,

unselfishness and social change. It emphasises that people's identities are continuously developing in the context of their reciprocal relationships with others, and thereby, through supporting and nurturing others, one's own identity and life quality are enhanced. Ubuntu focuses on the inclusivity of everyone within a community, their responsibility to others and to the well-being of the environment to ensure success for their own and future generations. Ubuntu is, therefore, timeless in the sense that the knowledge and practice have been passed from previous generations and apply to yet unborn generations; everything is connected. (ibid.).

When an Ubuntu-practising social worker is confronted with a problem, she does not seek to analyse it into components or parts, but rather she will ask in what larger context the problem resides. Individual identity and contributions are not denied but are seen as part of the whole. A successful individual is defined as someone that is committed to supporting others with integrity (ibid.).

Ubuntu brings to the world what Western civilization failed to bring. It brings the human face to every aspect of life. It, therefore, has its place in social work. When applied to social work, Ubuntu stands for humane social work, using humane methods to achieve human goals. Social workers have a twin responsibility of embracing Ubuntu and using the values of Ubuntu to influence their peers and clients (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013, p.99).

Interest in synthesising Ubuntu values in social work practice is not limited to African countries. The International Federation of Social Workers has received information of more than 300 social work events promoting Ubuntu from across the world and the wide embrace of Ubuntu by global social work clearly reflects the profession's interest in enriching its own principles with the Indigenous values centred on interconnection and reciprocity.

## Buen Vivir and social work

Buen Vivir is the current global theme of the social work profession and the second time an indigenous approach has been highlighted. Following Ubuntu from the African region, IFSW is promoting Buen Vivir. It comes from the Latin American indigenous concept and means ‘Good Living’, which draws on the (Amazonian) Kichwa term *Sumak Kawsay*. It invites us to consider human societies and their environment in an integrated, non-hierarchical manner, in other words – a partnership with nature. It conveys understandings of well-being that go far beyond the simple notion of individual and economic security by putting notions of community and collectivity at the centre. It allows for the expression of a plurality of forms of relationships, citizen participation and the development of alternative production and distribution systems that allows the natural world to thrive to build a more just future.

It thus resonates with social work practices and reflections, as social workers work to promote social and environmental justice and rely on collaborative approaches that encourage and recognise the active participation of individuals in decision-making processes on topics that directly or indirectly affect them.

Buen Vivir provides guidance for social work in terms of:

- Adopting a holistic approach: Adopting an analysis that incorporates complex and intertwined dimensions – social, cultural, economic, and environmental to understand the challenges that individuals and communities face.
- Community-centred practices: Involving participatory approaches to ensure that interventions are culturally adapted and sustainable.
- Interconnectedness with nature: Integrating environmental sustainability principles into social work practice and to advocate for policies and practices that promote environmental justice and stewardship.



- Cultural competence: Promoting the sense of a global citizen with rights and responsibilities, but with cultural rootedness, respecting, recognising and working with indigeneity.
- Emphasis on relationships and solidarity: Expanding solidarity to past, present and future generations and nature.
- Critique of Western development models: Critiquing the imperatives of economic growth at the detriment of human and nature's well-being and the modalities of hegemonic knowledge production and diffusion.
- Intersectionality: Acknowledging the intersectionality of identities and systems of oppression to identify and thematise historic injustices.
- Macro-practice: Taking leads from recent integration of the concept into the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia gives interesting leads for social work macro-practice.

The challenge that lies ahead is deepening the profession's understanding of indigenous cosmovisions and the spiritual realm such as Ubuntu and Buen Vivir and learning how their values can be adapted in settings of higher income countries with liberal economies and democracies and their welfare operations, in which social work is embedded, to strengthen or expand social work's existing principles, but without romanticising these principles.

***Reflections: In what way can Ubuntu and/or Buen Vivir complement existing methods and theories of social work?***

***What is the relevance of Ubuntu and/or Buen Vivir for social work in an international context?***

***To what extent can Ubuntu and/or Buen Vivir be applied in a selected project and contribute to its further development?***

## Conclusion

Integrating these two cosmovisions as part of the global profession's agenda, along with the efforts in recent years of two professional journals – *International Social Work* and the *African Journal of Social Work* – that have featured social work in low-income Southern countries has been critically important in the broader profession's learning. This is not only relevant in terms of addressing the profession's unbalanced publication record, but also for social workers in more resourced countries to learn about community work and consider the benefits to their practice contexts, beyond community work for youth.

Consequently, there is increasing recognition in the countries with resourced welfare systems on the right of their public to receive community work approaches in addition to the individualised services they already receive. For example, Finnish social work practitioners and others have successfully campaigned for community-oriented social work and community outreach to become part of their Social Welfare Act. From July 2023 onwards, the new section of the Act states that, "*The residents of the welfare area must have access to community-oriented social work*". The new Act describes why community work is important:

Community-oriented social work is provided to ensure social integration and welfare as well as good population relations in society. Community-oriented social work within the welfare area is carried out in collaboration with the area's residents and with municipalities, organisations and congregations. (Truell, 2023).

Globally seen, community development is a widely used intervention approach in social work, it relies on resources within the community to facilitate autonomous decision-making, solidarity and care. As community members own the outcomes of community development, these interventions are generally viewed as durable. In contexts where community solidarity and resilience are major forms of social protection systems, social

work has to work towards strengthening these systems through public and state support.

## Further reading

Coates, J. (2009). *Indigenous Social Work around the World: Towards Culturally Relevant Education and Practice* (M. Gray, Ed.) (1st ed.). Abingdon, UK: Taylor Francis. [online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315588360>.

This book addresses the question of: How can mainstream Western social work learn from and in turn help advance indigenous practice and discusses some of the most significant global trends and issues relating to indigenous and cross-cultural social work. The contributors identify ways in which indigenisation is shaping professional social work practice and education and examine how social work can better address diversity in international exchanges and cross-cultural issues, within and between countries.

DePaul. (n.d.). *Asset-Based Community Development: Toolkit*. [online]. Available at: <https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/resources/Pages/toolkit.aspx>

This freely available toolkit repository offers ready presentations and guidelines to train an audience in community development. The material is mainly concerned with the neighbourhood level, but can be adapted to local contexts.

Goel, K. (2014). 'Understanding Community and Community Development Defining the Concept of Community'. In: *Community Work: Theories, Experiences and Challenges*. Bengaluru, India: Niruta Publications, pp. 1-15.

This chapter gives a foundational understanding of different approaches to community and community development, outlining the elements, the functions and the strategies and principles. This textbook chapter is useful to develop the conceptual basis for community development.

Klinenberg, E. (2020). *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*. New York: Crown Publishing Group.

This book leads us to reflect the physical conditions to develop social capital and community. The author argues the importance of social physical infrastructure, such as libraries to promote community building and cohesion. This perspective is helpful in identifying community resources in terms of space, location and places that people value or see as a public good to gather, claim back or preserve.

Mayaka, B. & Truell, R. (2021). 'Ubuntu and its potential impact on the international social work profession'. In: *International Social Work*, 64(5), pp. 649–662. [online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208728211022787>.

In this article the authors describe the efforts by the IFSW to diffuse the vision of Ubuntu to inform social work practice.

Mayaka, B.; Uwihangana, C. & van Breda, A. (Eds.) (2023). *The Ubuntu Practitioner: Social Work Perspectives*. Berne: International Federation of Social Workers. [online]. Available at: [The Ubuntu Practitioner: Social Work Perspectives – International Federation of Social Workers \(ifsw.org\)](https://www.ifsw.org/publications/the-ubuntu-practitioner-social-work-perspectives).

This book is a comprehensive guide for social work practitioners who wish to embrace the principles of Ubuntu in their practice. Ubuntu is a philosophy originating from Africa that emphasises the interconnectedness and interdependence of all beings and the importance of community and relationships in human life. We hope that this will transform social work practice into something that cherishes the deep and shared humanity of all people. The book can be downloaded for free [here](#).

*Social Work in Ukraine*, documented by IFSW. [online]. Available at: <https://www.ifsw.org/social-work-in-ukraine/>

When at war, one can't count on any infrastructure or services, but the resources of the community are everything. IFSW has documented the many initiatives that were born during times of conflict. This continuous compilation represents an interesting resource of case studies that lead us to appreciate community development initiatives in a conflict situation.

Van Norren, D. (2020). 'The Sustainable Development Goals viewed through Gross National Happiness, Ubuntu and Buen Vivir'. In: *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics*, 20(3), pp. 431-458. [online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10784-020-09487-3>.

This article gives a good understanding of three different cosmovisions and how they build on an understanding of community for the well-being of people and planet. These cosmovisions are articulated across their understanding of law, economy and the SDGs to argue that western 'modernism' is a strong underpinning to the common understanding of sustainable development.

Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). 'Belonging and the politics of belonging'. In: *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40(3), pp. 197-214. [online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331>.

In this article the author presents an analytical framework to understand belongingness – the foundation to community – and argues for the importance of the possibility and liberty of expression and the recognition of expression (politics of belonging) to develop a sense of belonging that nurtures cultural citizenship.

## Teaching exercises

The aim of the exercises is to make students realise the complexity of community development and the necessity to consider very local contexts, issues and resources. There are as many methods to facilitate community development as contexts. The creativity of students can be solicited!

## (1) Community and its dynamics:

- This exercise is useful to reflect the notion of community and its dynamics:
  - Have students stand in a circle and take a woollen ball. Let one student hold the thread and throw the ball to another student. Each time a student gets the ball, he/she shall say to which community he/she feels belonging. The woollen ball travels across hands the same way until it forms a weave.
  - Each student would have mentioned a community. It is then important to discuss the communities mentioned, how they correspond to the definition of community and reflect on the nature and make-up of the community.
  - What are the common interests, the divergencies or conflicts? Once the weave stands, you could discuss what it means when there is a density of threads in the hand of one student (leadership?), tensions in the weave, loose bits, students not holding the thread (exclusion), etc.

## (2) Complexity of community development:

- The following exercise is useful to think through the complexity of community development and usually ends up in generating more questions than answers:
  - Take any issue in your own community and think through the iterative steps of community development mentioned above.
  - What is the issue? Whom does it concern? Who or what could be part of the solution and why?
  - Who is the community, what kind of dynamics are inherent to the community in question, how to gather them together and through which means?
  - Are we creating conditions of equity for participation? What tools and methods could be useful?

### (3) Non-western cosmovisions:

- This exercise involving non-western cosmovisions is useful to de-centre oneself from one's own practice. Take a known social work intervention in your context and try to think through one of the cosmovisions elaborated above:
  - What would change, whom you would involve or exclude, what resources would you need.
  - What would be the expected outcome coherent to the cosmovision?
  - How did this exercise change your perception of the intervention and the possibilities that it revealed?

**Lessons learned:** These exercises generally reveal the complexity, but also the possibilities of community development. They also question the professional disposition of the social worker, as one is pulled away from an expert position into a position of facilitation, in which the expertise of the lived experience is recognised in the participants. The relevance of community development could be expanded beyond the typical intervention sites (e.g. social work with youth – how this could be expanded more into the community, what are the relevant policy issues, etc.?).

# Chapter 6

## Eco-Social Work

By Swetha Rao Dhananka

### Overview

Increasingly, environmental concerns coupled with communities' wellbeing have been on the agenda of the social work profession, based on the growing recognition that socially vulnerable communities are at higher risk of experiencing environmental injustice. So, when the profession faces current intersecting socio-economic and ecological crises affecting vulnerable populations, premised on the principle of social justice, then it is compelled to engage in activities supporting eco-social justice.

While eco-social concerns are now established in the social work literature, social work education and practice are yet to make the leap, in particular in high income countries, in which fewer communities depend on environmental resources for their livelihood.

These are some questions that emerge in class around eco-social work. Does climate and environmental injustice concern social work? Don't these injustices rather concern low-income countries? Isn't social work about the social? Are environmental concerns to be tackled by other professions? If social work ought to take its place to tackle environmental issues, what is its role? What are the opportunities and challenges to integrate eco-social practices into social work and what are they?



While many students are passionate about the climate emergency and have high environmental awareness, they struggle to articulate links between social work as a profession and the questions related to the environmental crisis. Especially regarding social work in institutionalised contexts and case management, the links are not very evident and are yet to be spelled out and made sense of. To address these open questions, we set the following learning objectives:

## Learning objectives

- To familiarise with the SDG agenda and understand some theoretical premises for eco-social, social work practice in the face of social and environmental injustices.
- To situate social work's role and contribution to face these eco-social challenges
- To identify key social work competencies for eco-social practice.
- To be familiar with IFSW commitments to promote sustainable development goals and hence advance an eco-social world through social work.
- To develop a richer imagination of what an eco-social work practice could consist of and to identify particular threats and opportunities to the promotion of eco-social work practice in local contexts.

## The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The use of both terms – ‘sustainability’ or ‘sustainable development’ – is not always clear. ‘Sustainability’ evokes the idea that there are limits to the exploitation of resources, in which limits of planetary resources have to be respected in the knowledge that there is “no planet B” (Bottici, 2021, p.144). ‘Sustainable development’ is seen as the process that will lead to that end, still with an emphasis on the need for economic growth (Peeters, 2012) – a contradiction in terms, if the economic activity continues to be extractive and exploitative of natural and human resources.

It is apparent that the current neo-liberal, capitalistic configurations can't deliver sustainability and currently fosters these 'crises of inequality', standing in the way. Green social work popularised by Dominelli (2018) challenges neo-liberalism on two fronts. First, as an economic and socio-political force that shapes and dismantles the landscape of care through the primacy given to economic growth. Second, neo-liberalism as a cultural force encourages frames of individual consumerist satisfaction over care for the planet (Deepak & Mathbor, 2023).

While neo-liberalism promotes green development based on western modernism, it embodies linear growth and results-based thinking instead of cyclical and process thinking (van Norren, 2020). An alternative imagination of economic sustainable cooperation must be cultivated to take the agenda forward.

The concept of 'sustainable development' is highly significant today as the world community came together to agree on the 2030 agenda to tackle poverty at the same time as environmental issues to create a just and liveable world for everyone became much more relevant as a topical global issue – including current and future generations' (ibid.). There is a revolutionary idea behind the 2015-2030 agenda – namely, that all of us need to develop! This includes the poorest and the richest people, and all countries in the world. While the low-income countries need to enhance and develop their social conditions and thresholds, the middle- and high-income countries have to lower their carbon footprints and other environmentally damaging practices that puts at risk the evolution of planetary resources and the rapidly changing climate. As today's risks are globalised, the agenda needs to put forward the requirement to develop together in consideration of local realities and global interdependencies – this is where the international dimension is important to consider, even if initiatives are locally conducted.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 goals and 169 targets adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for

Sustainable Development. The SDGs represent a significant shift from the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as they not only focus on poverty reduction, but also address issues such as environmental sustainability, gender equality, and social justice. The goals cover an enormous range of issues, including poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, industry, innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, life on land, and peace, justice and strong institutions.



Figure 3: Sustainable Development Goals. Source: United Nations, <https://www.un.org/tr/sustainable-development-goals>

Every country now has to carve its own pathway to a sustainable future in which biophysical boundaries are not transgressed and social thresholds are achieved (*The Future is Now* report, United Nations, 2019). The synthesis report of 2019 shows that there is no country that hardly transgresses biophysical boundaries by achieving high social thresholds. This shows that the world doesn't only need change and adaptation, but deeper transformation

to achieve human activity within biophysical boundaries by achieving high social thresholds. Deeper and more complex interrelationships between the SDGs that are represented in silos, are to be understood in terms of trade-offs and co-benefits. Social workers have to be aware of these complexities in an eco-social world to contribute in a sensible way to fight social and environmental injustice.

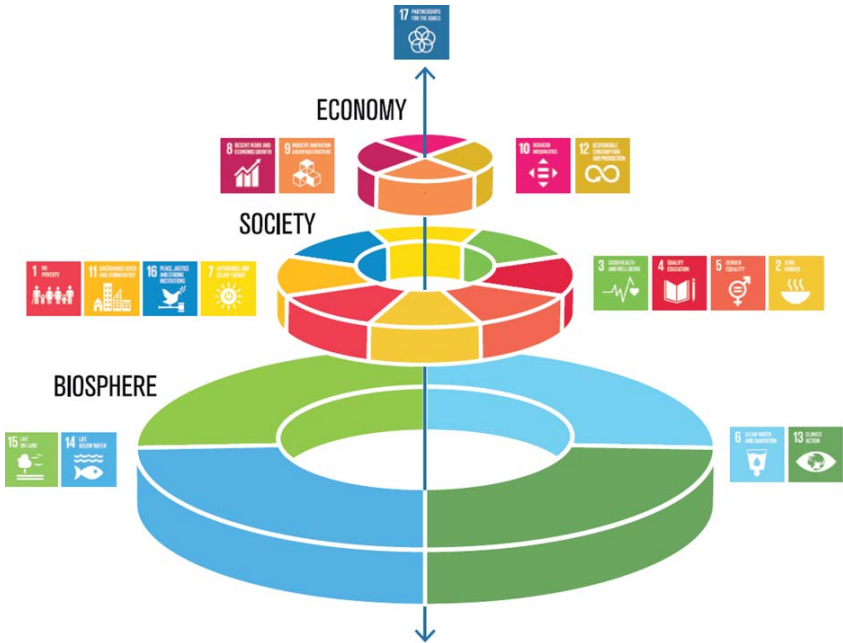


Figure 4: The SDG's Wedding Cake. Source: <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/research-news/2016-06-14-the-sdgs-wedding-cake.html>

The doughnut-shaped model (above), depicts the inner and outer circle of the doughnut that delimits biophysical and social threshold boundaries of activities. These are stacked as a wedding cake, as it prioritises the SDGs that are the base for planetary survival at the bottom – the SDGs pertaining to the biosphere (SDG 15, 14, 6, 13). Only if these are secured, can SDGs pertaining to society exist and be achieved (SDG 1, 11, 16, 7, 3, 4, 5, 2). The top layer

of the wedding cake pertains to economy (SDG 8, 9, 10, 12). The wedding cake is held together through meaningful partnerships (SDG17).

## The relevance of the SDGs to social work

The SDGs are important for social work because they offer a framework for understanding and addressing the complex **social, economic, and environmental challenges** facing communities around the world. One of the key principles of the SDGs is the idea of **leaving no one behind**. This means that the goals must be achieved for all people, regardless of their income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, or any other factor. Social workers are trained to work with diverse populations and to understand the complex and intersecting factors that contribute to social inequality and exclusion. By promoting inclusion and ensuring that the voices of marginalised groups are heard, social workers can help to ensure that the SDGs are achieved in a way that is equitable and sustainable.

It is important, however, to remind ourselves that the **SDGs were created through a top-down approach** with the participation of governments, international organisations, and other stakeholders. However, social workers can engage with communities from the bottom-up to relay their specific needs, priorities, and challenges. Communities may not be familiar with the SDGs, or they may use different terminology to describe their problems, aspirations, and priorities. Therefore, social workers play a crucial role in helping communities become part of this global agenda and facilitating positive social change. By engaging with people and their communities, social workers can bridge the gap between the SDGs and local needs, ensuring that the SDGs are translated into meaningful actions that address the issues faced by communities.

The SDGs provide a framework and a common vocabulary for social workers and other professions involved in promoting the agenda to address the global climate crisis and work towards creating a more just and equitable

society. By incorporating the SDGs into social work practice, the profession can make visible their contribution to the advancement of the agenda, to which they do through caring work at all levels of intervention.

On the one hand, the latest SDG report and many other reports pinpoint the failure of politics, human behavioural patterns, and the lack of partnerships for transformational change. On the other hand, multi-disciplinary knowledge on the effect of human activity on planetary ecosystems is largely established. The conundrum at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) conference on eco-social contracts (2021) was: *“We know enough, there is need for action”*. Social work can engage in such action in bringing relevant partners together and facilitating a bottom-up articulation with the top-down measures.

## Social work theory to make sense of the eco-social challenge

A concept analysis pertaining to articles that discuss the articulation between environment, sustainability and social work by Ramsay & Boddy (2017), uniquely consolidate that the theoretical focus of social work must change to include the natural and physical environment (extension of person in environment concept) to make practitioners aware of the interrelationship of people within nature and the built environment and their ability to disrupt natural systems. To enable this shift social workers need to be aware that social concerns related to housing, child protection, poverty and other social ills are compounded by environmental degradation which will need to be taken into account. Social work concepts and theories that make sense of these concerns are as follows:

### Person in environment:

This concept recognises the influence of factors on human function beyond the scope of the individual and makes the social environment equally a target of change as the person in the environment. The environment is often understood as the transactions of people with other social constructs

(family, school, welfare, etc.). However, stripping the physical and natural dimension from the environment fosters individualistic reasoning and a disconnect to larger interrelationships which are vital to consider. This is where indigenous cosmologies of inter-being with nature are very fruitful as they expand the person in the environment concept to include the physical and natural environment.

### **Environmental justice:**

Environmental justice occurs when all people equally experience high levels of environmental protection and no group is excluded from environmental decision-making, or affected disproportionately by environmental hazards (Erickson, 2018). Social work engages in creating and sustaining systems and relationships of justice. The pursuit of environmental justice engages citizens in local and international struggles for economic resources, health and well-being and in struggles of political voice and the realisation of civil and human rights (ibid).

### **Strengths perspective:**

This foundational and empowering concept in social work practice of enhancing strengths in individuals and communities, even in the most difficult situations, can be extended to the environment. By asking individuals, families and communities to identify the benefits they enjoy from their physical and natural environment and then making these an asset to their well-being will strengthen their capacity to deal with hardship and trauma (ibid.).

### **Eco-social practice:**

The core building blocks of the eco-social practice model (Peeters, 2012) are: own strength, social capital, resilience and empowerment (as social change) viewed in an ecosystem perspective relevant across micro, meso and macro levels. Community-level social work interventions cultivate social capital, resilience and empowerment to scale-up concerns and

encourage systems change through advocacy. In social work it is important to shift from an individual focus to a wider social-ecological one.

### Common good:

A 'commons' represents an institutional arrangement between a resource, its use being regulated and a community devising its rules (Dhananka & Saldanha, 2021) and derives from Ostrom's seminal work on the governance of the commons in natural resources management. Gibson-Graham, (2018) underline that communities are constituted through the process of 'commoning' (and vice-versa) and hence suggest to rather use commoning as a verb. A 'commoning-community' engages in a relational process involving, 1) negotiating access; 2) creating protocols for its use; 3) distributing benefit; 4) taking care; and 5) accepting responsibility. The driving force to engage a community in commoning is the creation of a common conception of alternatives. Schematically speaking, the exploration of an alternative lifestyle is based first and foremost on an imaginary dichotomy between the desirable and the undesirable and then agreeing a way forward based on the common good (Hopkins, 2021).

Designing principles for commoning, as spelled out by Ostrom 1990, in Helfrich & Bollier (2015), describe eight mechanisms: Boundaries on usage; congruence regarding the rules and cultural conditions; collective decisions; monitoring of users and resources; graduated sanctions; conflict resolution; recognition and polycentric governance if necessary.

## Social work skills to address the climate emergency

Social work could intervene by **accompanying adaptive and mitigative measures** to communities in terms of:

- Social work assistance during disaster situations for **autonomous adaptation**: That is in response to experienced climate effects, without planning explicitly or consciously focused on addressing climate change.



- Prevention organised by social work for **anticipatory adaptation**: Adaptation that takes place before impacts of climate change are lived (ibid.).
- Facilitation and co-construction lead by social workers for **planned adaptation** and alternatives: Adaptation that is the result of a deliberative policy decision on an awareness that conditions have changed or are about to change and that action is required to return to, to maintain or to achieve a desired state (ibid.).

Social work could intervene by **supporting communities to restore and conserve environments and livelihood systems** that are based on natural resources through:

- Promoting indigenous knowledge and legitimise the communities' knowledge of their own environment.
- Supporting in communicating, mobilising and advocating for the concerns of affected communities to authorities and persons in power.
- Creation of nature-based social work interventions to address social and environmental justice issues within the community.
- Facilitation of partnerships supported by enabling political leadership, institutions, resources in which communities can take part in decision-making that concerns them to render societies more resilient.

#### **Case Study: 'Re-design of an urban street market in India'**

This case study is contextualised in an urban setting in India and deals with the re-design and co-management of an urban street market, which is the heart of a livelihood for formal shopkeepers, informal street vendors, the hub of provisioning for neighbourhood customers and devotees participating in the cultural and temple circuit in the area. The street market selling fruits, vegetables and flowers incorporates generational ties and is known to be of very high quality as the inhabitants of the area stem from middle to higher social classes and castes. The street vendors are not formally organised.

While there is a registered Dalit association in the area, the vendors group themselves along the trades they practise, but do not have a registered association. Every vending trade (flowers, vegetables, fruits and plastic items) have identified vendors with leadership skills and involvement, who voice on the behalf of other vendors. These leaders emerge from families who have been trading in the area for generations, and hence well know the political and social fabric, and how to cater to the taste of long-standing customers.

The mandate for this project was given by a public international cooperation agency of a European country. The project hired 'market management consultants' that involved a local NGO's staff: a social and environmental activist, a social work trained researcher and a community worker. The objective of the mandate was to develop a comprehensive street market management system that ensures efficient utilisation of street market facilities / services and adequately responds to the needs of the market users. This system had to eventually act as a template for replication with established urban street markets elsewhere in the city and other cities.

The comprehensive street market management system was to be based upon a Street Market Management Model that would have been agreed with and suggested for implementation by relevant public and private stakeholders and would be available to the concerned department within the City Municipality. The model had to be devised through a participative methodology and had to incorporate inclusive social, hygiene, sustainability and gender standards.

To describe the case, the consultants first aimed at framing the urban market as a common good, which could relate SDG8 (decent work & economic growth), SDG11 (sustainable cities and communities) and SDG12 (responsible consumption and production). This allowed them to put tensions around formal shopkeepers and street vendors informally occupying the urban space into the background and focus on the vending members as a 'commoning' community, who hold a stake in redesign of the urban space and who should all participate in decision-making. This vending community was highly divided on many fronts: by trade, by formality, by gender, by political party and by seniority of presence in the urban market. While our intervention sought

to create equal conditions for the community to express themselves, the informal street vendors were vocal, but their say had a different weight in the eyes of established shop owners and bureaucrats.

The occasion to trigger alternative imagination was offered by the international cooperation agency, as they had budget left to do an exploratory visit to the Mother's market (Ima Keithel) in Manipur – a city in North-East India – with a delegation of 15 including the consultants, bureaucrats, shop keepers and street vendors. This market was previously presented as an example of a self-governed, partly pedestrianised street-market in a global review of markets.

The Ima Keithel is a legendary space. It functions as a political, educational and entrepreneurial space. Ima Keithel incorporates institutional arrangements along with self-identified goals and is run by generations of only women. The market anchors the local economy. Over the years, the women's collective political power and economic importance has developed through the market space and has been a prevailing force in becoming the socio-economic engine of the region. As a market space, it provides the entire region livelihoods, promoting multiple local economies by extending to them a hub of clients to sell their agrarian and artisanal products and also raw materials (Dhananka & Saldanha, 2021).

During the visit, in an exchange with the female leaders of the market, the women street vendors saw an alternative to their everyday experience of being looked down upon as 'street-vending' women. They admired the way female leaders dressed, the dignity and self-confidence with which they spoke and how they had kept the organisation of the market so strong and the local economy so flourishing, that even local male politicians bent to their rules. In other words, they decolonised their stigma of being 'poor street-vending women' and recolonised their imagination with the idea of becoming dignified street-vending women, who direct their own development.

This exposure triggered in the women of the street-market the grit to organise themselves into a street-vending association, to be visible to the state and to speak as one voice to participate and co-decide on the re-design and the management of the market in their city. While the intervention by the

market-management consultants/NGO staff adhered to a commons approach (in the design principles), the endearment with the less privileged was key to participation.

***Reflection: Which are the SDG priorities in the place you reside? Which are the initiatives to promote the SDG agenda in your city or area you live in?***

***To what extent do social workers in your country have the awareness of the SDG agenda and their contribution to it?***

- ***Are they concerned about the SDGs (if they know about them)?***
- ***Do they incorporate them in their practice?***

## Conclusion

Across this chapter, we have identified social work's role and contribution to the promotion of SDGs and an eco-social world through the conceptualisation of eco-social practices. Social work's skill base is perfectly adapted and transferable for this cause by creatively applying existing social work skills to environmental concepts. The skills include: empowerment, team building, community development, management, culturally competent and anti-oppressive practice, multi-level assessments, holistic interventions and relational practices.

Openness in attitude to different values, and ways of being, doing and seeing allows a shift in practice, theory and values to incorporate the natural environment (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). There are opportunities to learn from spirituality and indigenous knowledge such as Ubuntu and Buen Vivir, to incorporate the natural environment in social work education, to appreciate the instrumental and innate value of non-human life, to critique hegemony and importantly to work in multidisciplinary teams.

Social workers who engage across mezzo- and macro-levels, in local and transnational contexts, are skilled in community organisation, facilitation, advocacy and care to assist communities to fight environmental injustices and are key to co-build alternative possibilities leading to more eco-social lifestyles.

## Further Reading

Androff, D. & Damanik, J. (Eds.). (2023). *The International Handbook of Social Development, Social Work, and the Sustainable Development Goals*. New York: Routledge.

This handbook highlights the practitioners of social development, such as social workers as key to the implementation of the SDGs and examines how the SDGs are being implemented in diverse contexts. It broadens the current literature by focusing on key sites throughout the Global South and features underrepresented voices from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, as these regions are vitally important to assessing the SDGs where innovative social development projects are occurring, and where social workers are playing a leading role in achieving the SDGs. [online]. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9781003177265/routledge-international-handbook-social-development-social-work-sustainable-development-goals-david-androff-janianton-damanik>

Dominelli, L. (2012). *Green Social Work. From Environmental Crises to Environmental Justice*. Cambridge, Malden, MA, Polity Press.

‘Green Social Work’ is a seminal work that examines the intersection of social work and environmental sustainability. Published in 2012, it explores how social workers can play a crucial role in addressing environmental issues and promoting eco-social justice. Dominelli advocates for a paradigm shift in social work practice that integrates environmental concerns into the profession’s core

values and principles. Through case studies, the book looks at how social workers can engage with communities to tackle environmental challenges and empower marginalised groups disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and catastrophe.

Hopkins R. (2021). *From what is to what If: Unleashing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future We Want*. London: Chelsea Green Publishing.

This book offers a range of examples in different sectors to ignite the imagination of alternative and more sustainable futures. Social workers are key to bringing communities together to envision alternative futures.

Ramsay, S. & Boddy, J. (2017). 'Environmental social work: A concept analysis'. In: *British Journal of Social Work*, 47(1), pp. 68-86. [online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw078>

This concept analysis is very useful to develop an overview of how the 'natural environment' has trickled through social work theory and how it informs practice and education. The article identifies the attributes and characteristics of environmental social work to develop an operational definition.

Raworth, C. (2018). *Doughnut Economics. Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist*. Random House. London.

Even though not directly related to social work, this seminal book in economics situates the perimeter for social work's contribution within the concept of the 'doughnut', which represents the space between planetary boundaries and social foundations, where humanity can thrive. Social workers are pivotal to uphold and achieve the social boundary in this context.

United Nations (2019). *The Future is Now: Science for Achieving Sustainable Development*. New York: United Nations. [online]. Available at:

[https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/24797GSDR\\_report\\_2019.pdf](https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/24797GSDR_report_2019.pdf)

This is a report that synthesises various reports on the status of SDGs. It includes interesting graphics to understand the SDGs in their complexity, also the global advancements (before the pandemic), the stake for private actors and the required systemic reforms.

### Important IFSW policy documents:

Social Work and the UN SDGs (2021)

This policy paper highlights the importance of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for social work practice and advocates for social workers to actively engage in achieving the SDGs. Available at: <https://www.ifsw.org/social-work-and-the-united-nations-sustainable-development-goals-sdgs/>

The Role of Social Workers in Advancing a New Eco-Social World (2022)

This policy calls for a shift in social work practice towards an eco-social perspective that recognises the interdependence of social and ecological systems. Available at: <https://www.ifsw.org/the-role-of-social-workers-in-advancing-a-new-eco-social-world/>

The People's Charter for an Eco-Social World (2022)

This is a living document and outlines a vision for a more sustainable and just world. It is the outcome of the people's summit for a new eco-social world 2022, co-facilitated by IFSW after the Covid-19 pandemic. Available at: <https://newecosocialworld.com/the-peoples-charter-for-an-eco-social-world/>

## Teaching exercises

While the first teaching resource (quiz) is useful to check the knowledge students have on SDGs, all other assignments aim to conscientise students on climate change and environmental deterioration across time and geographies to reflect not only the eco-social implications, but also the north-south solidarities that must be acted upon.

### (1) Quiz on sustainability:

Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/unai-quiz-sustainability>

- Take any food, for example a chocolate cookie. Think of every ingredient in it, every person and process that was required to produce the cookie and bring it into your hands. What were the possible social and environmental conditions to produce the cookie you are holding? Think of geography, time, capital and people – the entire chain.
- Organise peer-to-peer learning sessions in a culturally and geographically diverse classroom (especially in COIL collaborative online international learning settings) for localised understanding and interpretations of eco-social challenges and reflections of everyday issues embedded in structural dynamics. Discussion points could for example be: Changes between your everyday experiences / practices and your parents'/grandparents' everyday experiences / practices in regard to climate (seasons, rainfall, observable adaptation, who is most affected etc.), biodiversity (eating habits, food basket, fauna and flora, observable changes, imports and environmental costs, etc.), urban waste (what types and quantity of waste, segregation and management practices, gender and labour issues, etc.).
- Browse the environmental justice atlas <https://ejatlas.org/> for case studies and discover cases in your region and discuss with peers, if



you were aware of these issues and how the cases concern social work.

## (2) Develop a case study:

*This exercise aims to develop a case study to teach eco-social practice and to deliver the case as a story, followed by an exercise as group work: Example – ‘Bangalore’s toxic legacy intensifies’ (esgindia.org). Explore cases concerning contamination of the environment (or any case that the faculty is familiar with, or pick a documented one from the environmental justice atlas).*

- Aim of the group work:
  - Consider interlinkages between social and environmental justice through a case study.
  - Map mechanisms, knowledge and skill requirements necessary to engage with contaminated communities.
  - Articulate local and global perspectives to support contaminated communities.
  
- Group work on filling up a grid (3 lines x 4 columns):
  - Lines: micro, meso, macro.
  - Columns: identify mechanisms within the case study, e.g. effects of pollution on a community (micro: deteriorating personal health because of pollution, loss of livelihood; meso: impoverishment of communities, decrease in community cohesion, weak resources for claim-making; macro: pathways of contamination, institutional neglect).
  - Interdisciplinary knowledge requirements to understand the mechanisms, interdisciplinary skill/competency requirements to address the issues, interventions and partnerships to devise solutions to the issues.

Filling up a grid...

Analytical level	Mechanisms	Knowledge requirement	Skills/Competencies requirement	Alliances and interventions
Macro				
Meso				
Micro				

Figure 5: Case study grid

**Lessons learned:** Social work students in western contexts in general have had hardly any content regarding environmental justice in their curricula. Opening their perspectives through these exercises that are anchored in their own local context, but are broadened to include the entire chain of geographies, times and socio-ecological conditions and interactions in articulation with social work skills, makes them reflect on the following:

- the complex interdependencies (communities, agencies, governments, etc.)
- the pertinence and legitimacy of social work's role for eco-social work, and
- the importance of claiming accountability from diverse actors for more eco-socially responsible action.

# Chapter 7

## Concluding Remarks

By Eveline Amman Dula

### Social work as a global profession

The various topics explained in the chapters of the handbook aim to situate social work as a global profession and to give students and practitioners an orientation to the central instruments, methods and approaches of social work as a global profession. Students and practitioners, as well as academics, should be enabled to contextualise the respective normative and local settings of social work in an international context and to orient themselves towards the common ethical principles of social work. This should assist them in placing their own practice, challenges, but also theories and methods into perspective and to broaden their horizons for other approaches.

The following questions can be helpful for reflecting on your own practice:

- To what extent do I contribute to the [global Definition of Social Work](#)?
- To what extent do I observe the [ethical principles of social work](#) in my work, in my organisation? Which ones are in the foreground, which ones tend to be neglected?
- What knowledge, methods and concepts do I draw on in my work? Where are they from?
- Do I include indigenous knowledge in my work? How does indigenous knowledge inform social work in my context?

- What do I know about local lifestyles and existing solidarity structures of the persons I work with?
- What kind of international power structures might be relevant for my work? How do they affect my own position and those I am working with?
- What forms of power are relevant in my work? To what extent do I empower others?
- To what extent do I include the community in my work?
- To what extent do I take the eco-social dimension into account?

It is about understanding social work as a profession that recognises existing power structures and initiates and leads processes of change, to overcome them. Social work as a global profession makes it possible to tackle cross-border phenomena and challenges together and to work on them in co-operation and mutual understanding.

To work for a common understanding of social work despite its local and national differences, it might be important to enable social work students, practitioners and academics to share their experiences and to be involved in many forms of collaboration and exchange:

- between different forms of knowledge production such as academic knowledge and social work practice
- between communities and social work
- between different relevant stakeholders on local, regional, national and international levels and contexts.

We suggest the following forms of collaboration and exchange:

- (1) To use existing forms of collaboration and networks to exchange ideas, concepts and methods.
- (2) To develop together research projects, using methods – for example methods like participatory action research or to develop together new methods, manuals or position papers using practical and theoretical knowledge to address current challenges.

- (3) To develop new forms of online exchange, such as webinars to overcome geographic distances and avoid travel costs.

Social work as a global profession needs to get to know different perspectives, realities and methods to address together global challenges, to further develop the practice-based profession, to integrate more voices in knowledge production in order to promote together social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people. This includes the necessity to decentre oneself to find alternative ways of seeing, understanding and co-building solutions.

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## Resources

### Social work online journals

- [Transnational Social Review](#)
- [Journal of Social Work: SAGE Journals \(sagepub.com\)](#)
- [Social Work & Society \(uni-wuppertal.de\)](#)
- [International Social Work: Sage Journals \(sagepub.com\)](#)

### Useful links

#### UN

- [How To Join The UN As A Social Worker \(Complete Guide\) - Humanitarian Careers](#)
- [THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development \(un.org\)](#)
- [Data Center | Human Development Reports \(undp.org\)](#)

#### IFSW

- [International Federation of Social Workers \(ifsw.org\)](#)
- [United Nations \(ifsw.org\)](#)

### Glossaries

- [Category:International organisations glossary - Statistics Explained \(europa.eu\)](#)
- [Climate justice](#)
- [Community Development](#) (especially in urban contexts)
- [Decolonising glossary - Curatorial Research Centre](#)
- [Environmental justice](#)
- [Gender Equality Glossary | UNW WRD Knowledge Hub \(un-women.org\)](#)
- [Glossary Archive - Postcolonial Space](#)



- [Glossary of international migration IOM \(iom.int\)](#)
- [Human rights glossary](#)
- [Indigenous knowledge](#)

This handbook arises from teaching international social work in the context of Switzerland. A key aim is to extend social work beyond narrow national perspectives and see the profession as truly global and international. This will transform its everyday practice in the workplace, with the realisation that there is a multiplicity of factors that have relevance and meaning for the individuals, groups and communities social workers engage with. This means respecting indigenous knowledge, realising the impact of colonialism and power imbalance and working towards developing a new 'eco-social' perspective that is more holistic and inclusive than the traditional, Western-oriented and neo-liberal approach so dominant in current practice. The authors – representing academic and professional (IFSW) backgrounds – provide their own perspectives and insights into these issues.



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