Review Article

International social work as a human rights profession in the global society: Challenges and implications of the Sustainable Development Goals

Michael Boecker ID
Fachhochschule Dortmund, University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Germany

Dorothée Boecker ID
Fachhochschule Dortmund, University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Germany

Abstract

This article discusses the importance of international social work in a global society. In an increasingly globalised world, we are interconnected in many ways and interdependent in a complex geopolitical (dis)order. This also applies to those involved in social work as a human rights profession. For a long time, the idea was that social workers had to act solely on a national level and that looking beyond one's own country could be refreshing but was unnecessary. However, we know how important international relationships, networks, and scientific exchanges are today. Geopolitical decisions often affect social work and its target groups at their core. Existential poverty and unemployment in countries of the Global South led to flight and migration to countries of the Global North. Crises such as wars or natural disasters have a wide range of effects on global value chains. The unequal distribution of poverty and wealth leads to asymmetrical power relations, which are not least the legacy of colonial and apartheid influence. This makes the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations even more important.

Corresponding Author: Michael Boecker; Fachhochschule Dortmund, University of Applied Sciences and Arts, michael.boecker@fh-dortmund.de

If, for example, the first goal in SDG 1 is formulated as "No poverty", then this poses numerous challenges for social work stakeholders in municipalities, states, and nations, to which they must find an answer. These challenge social work on several levels. The following article aims to discuss these challenges at macro-, meso- and micro levels and formulate mandates for action for international social work stakeholders. The aim is to contribute to forming a professional understanding that is defined beyond national structures and mandates.

Keywords: international social work, global society, Sustainable Development Goals, human rights

Introduction

Due to the steadily advancing globalisation of the labour market and increasing international challenges, the areas of experience and action relevant to social work can no longer be understood as a nationally limited unit. They are increasingly determined by global issues and thus form the basis for the internationalisation of social work (Healy & Thomas, 2020). As early as 1996, Ludger Pries spoke of the "transnationalization of the social world" and "social spaces beyond national societies". Topics such as migration and flight, poverty segregation, demographic change and social sustainability are being discussed intensively internationally. They are becoming increasingly important for those involved in social work and other related human service professions (Pries, 1996).

The idea that social workers had to act solely on a national level and that looking beyond one's own country could be refreshing but was not necessary was never right and is now less correct than ever. Today, we know how building critical international relationships, networks, and international scientific exchange can advance social work education, research, and practice (Healy & Thomas, 2020). This became even more blatant during the COVID-19 pandemic. In an increasingly globalised world, we are interconnected in many ways in a complex geopolitical (dis)order (Brand, 2020). This also applies to social work beneficiaries, practitioners and stakeholders.

This article discusses the necessity of international social work as a human rights profession, particularly in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals context. This is not an empirical study. It is important for the authors to formulate initial questions as to which tasks the profession can and must address at the macro-, meso- and micro-levels. In addition to referring to relevant publications, questions for further reflection on procession theory are also offered. The article thus aims to provide food for thought and promote academic engagement with the complex global issues of our time. "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights", as stated in Article One of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (United Nations, 1948).

Human dignity is a universal right, and social work as a human rights profession must focus on these rights even in a supranational discourse. Geopolitical decisions often affect social work and its target groups at their core. Existential poverty and unemployment in countries of the Global South lead to flight and migration to countries of the Global North. Crises such as wars and natural disasters have various impacts on global value chains; for example, we can see currently with grain coming from Ukraine. The unequal distribution of poverty and wealth leads to asymmetrical power relations, not least the legacy of apartheid and colonial influence (Dörre et al., 2019).

In this context, the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations are thus more than just a compass in confused and turbulent times and or a playground for transformative social work research. The extent to which the 17 SDGs are implemented will have a decisive impact on the lives of future generations and affect humanity as a whole. Hunger, poverty, gender inequality, educational opportunities, global warming and much more affect people's everyday lives and living environments (Brand, 2012; Brand & Wissen, 2017; Lessenich, 2016). The SDGs of the United Nations are not abstract, but they are interconnected and challenge social work on several levels, as it were:

> *At the macro-level*, national and international framework conditions must be considered, and changes must be addressed. Therefore,

social work can only be political and radical, focusing on advocating structural and institutional changes.

At the meso-level, the interaction of people and institutions must be addressed. Therefore, social work can only successfully build authentic networks and partnerships in the social development sector.

At the micro-level, it is important to accept people with dignity and in their wholeness and develop tailor-made assistance and solutions. Therefore, social work can only be successful if it includes people's living environment and circumstances.

This is only possible if social workers are bold and assertive about upholding a rights-based approach, increasing democracy and citizens' active participation and establishing itself as a strong profession. For this, international references and continuous student and academic exchanges are essential. This article is an outcome of the Global Transformation and Social Work Practice partnership of four universities – Fachhochschule Dortmund, University of Johannesburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal and Midland State University. DAAD is a German academic exchange organisation, and the four-year programme aims to build SDG partnerships (United Nations Sustainable Development Goals) between countries of the "Global North" and the "Global South".

There is a story we like to tell whose author is not known. A little girl is walking on the beach where thousands of starfish have been washed up by heavy waves. The girl lifts a starfish and throws it back into the water. An old man approaches the girl and says: "What are you doing? Look at the beach - there are thousands of starfish lying here; what difference does it make? The girl thinks for a moment, then picks up another starfish and throws it into the water. She replies, "It makes a difference to this one!". The story stops here.

We would like to tell the story a little further. In the best case, the little girl becomes a self-confident young woman, establishes contacts with the local and municipal authorities, organises political majorities and ensures that the

beach section has upstream safety precautions to prevent starfish from being washed ashore during strong swells.

Both perspectives are important for social work:

The view of the individual case and the view of the structural framework. Soup kitchens are important so that people do not have to go hungry, but they do not prevent structural poverty. In addition to assisting in individual cases, this requires socio-political programs and changes to the framework conditions. Only then can social work sustainably contribute to preventing poverty in the social space in the long term (Boecker, 2023). The following section presents deliberations on social work as a human rights profession.

Social work as a human rights profession
At the latest with Staub-Bernasconi (1995), the social work profession reflects its so-called third mandate. In addition to the legislative mandate and the requirements of society, social work as a human rights profession should enable the respect, dignity and participation of all people.

"Social work has to give itself this third mandate. Using this self-commissioning, social work [has] to diagnose and deal with social power issues professionally" (Staub-Bernasconi, 1995, p. 70).

This is where the international definition of social work comes in, as it states, among other things:

"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 diversity are central to social work." (IFSW/IASSW, 2014).

It becomes clear what the demands of the profession are. As an academic discipline, it enables the dignity of people by addressing structures and individual challenges. An exciting aspect of this definition is the inclusion of the term "indigenous knowledge" due to the commitment of the Global South countries, which are currently experiencing an important renaissance

(Twikirize & Spitzer, 2019). This is even more significant as the first reflections of postcolonial hegemony can be seen in this debate. Globalisation in the context of colonialism and hegemonic dominance continues to influence the approaches, methods and theories of social work in the countries of the Global South to this day (Boecker, 2023).

The above definition is widely known and is often quoted or cited as an argument for positioning social work as a human rights profession. However, what does the self-commitment of social work to act as a human rights profession mean? This cannot be achieved without critically reflecting on what defines human rights and, thus, human dignity. We would like to attempt here to formulate some food for thought by drawing on Immanuel Kant's (1742–1804) theory of the overriding authority of absolute justice. With Kant's universal paradigm of justice, commonly known as the categorical imperative, Kant sets the premise, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, that justice and, thus, just action have a value in themselves, independent of contemporary ideas of the world and society. Even if slavery was legitimised by the American constitution for a long time, it could never have been just in the Kantian sense. Kant is also the first thinker in modern history to condemn Abraham's obedience in killing his son Isaac, thereby placing human judgment of just action above the authority of a deity (Boehm, 2022).

"Since justice is universal, it is not only above the earthly authority of kings, as is known from other prophets, but also above the authority of the one true deity" (Boehm, 2022, p. 53). From this premise, Kant derives the dignity of man, which is never a means to an end but an end in itself and, above all, authority. "No human being has […] the right to obey" (Arendt, 1964). Human beings thus have dignity and no price, as Kant explains in the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals:

> "[A]ll things [have] either a price or a dignity. What has a price can be replaced by something else as an equivalent; what, on the other hand, is elevated above all price [...] has not merely a relative value [...] but an intrinsic value, [and that is] dignity." (Kant, 1968: 434f.).

However, dignity depends on freedom, which cannot be determined by specific concrete facts such as social norms or conventions. It can, therefore, only be abstract.

"No circumstance or consideration can ever override or undermine it. Kant's anchoring of universalism in the abstract concept of humanity recovers the commitment to a higher principle of justice. Universal norms refer to human beings, but transcend any human authority" (Boehm, 2022, p. 52) In addition to Kant, other contemporary thinkers of the Enlightenment, such as John Locke (1632–1704) and Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), also had a significant influence on questions of justice and the relationship between legitimate rule and society, which can be found not least in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, which states:

> "…We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government" (Declaration of Independence, 1776).

What can this brief recourse to the ideals of the Enlightenment and the Kantian imperative mean for social work actors in a global society?

Implications for International Social Work

Suppose the concept of justice is universal and human dignity is beyond any worldly or divine authority. In that case, some critical reflections arise for the profession of social work as a human rights profession, which can be concretised in the following questions, among others: What can the task of international social work be as a human rights profession?

What are the challenges of social development and social work practice about the commitment of countless countries to create a fairer world in the context of the SDGs? Justice here does not mean equality, as this can be highly unjust. Justice means equality of opportunity (Butterwegge et al., 2017; Butterwegge, 2016). One essential aspect is the unconditional advocacy of our profession for equal opportunities! Life is not equally fair for everyone, as Heribert Prantl, a German journalist, once said.

Life begins and ends unfairly, and it is not much better in between. One is born with a silver spoon in his mouth, the other in the ghetto. One wins the jackpot in nature's lottery, and the other draws a blank. One inherits talent and strength, the other illness and lack of drive. One gets a clever head, the other a weak heart. One is healthy all his life, and the other is born with a heavy handicap. Nature is a risk of justice. For one, a sheltered childhood is followed by a successful career. For the other, his path leads from the ghetto straight to prison. One grows up with books, the other with drugs. One goes to a school that makes him strong, the other to one that breaks him. One is clever, but no one promotes him. The other is less intelligent, but he is intensively promoted. No one has earned better genes or a better family. Fate has assigned them to them. One gets a job that makes them rich, another one that breaks them, and the next gets no job. This does not always have to do with personal achievement, not always with personal guilt. Fate deals unfairly, and it does not always balance out societal injustices (Prantl, 2020).

This is where social work can play a fundamental role. The profession ensures that people have natural, not just formal, opportunities. It can correct fates with measure and purpose. To achieve this, social work at national and international levels must consider different perspectives, as they were, which we briefly touched on at the beginning of this article. Here are some suggestions for further scientific analysis on macro-meso- and micro-level intervention strategies and for enhancing the application of the SDGs in practice.

At the macro level, The international players in social work and social development specialists, as well as related professions, must address the

structural conditions of global contexts even more than before and address injustices and power asymmetries. This requires a critical examination of historical responsibility, in particular of the countries of the "Global North" in the context of colonial dependencies, which to this day reproduce and perpetuate unequal living conditions between the countries of the "Global North" and the "Global South" and have a direct influence on the quality of people's lives in communities. One example of this is the extensive dismantling of agricultural production in many European countries to reduce CO2 emissions, which is partly responsible for the loss of biodiversity in large parts of South America and even rainforest deforestation. Or the dismantling of coal-fired power plants, for example, in Germany, while at the same time subsidising coal-based industries in the countries of southern Africa (Brand & Welzer 2019). This is why social work can only be political (Staub-Bernasconi, 2015) by constantly reflecting critically on global interdependencies in the context of the SDGs and influencing international and national policy. This can mean not accepting existing conditions and exposing them as unjust. No human being has the right to obey!

At the meso-level, Social work as an academic discipline is already interdisciplinary in its approach, as it draws on a wide range of basic sciences. Examples include psychology, social and educational sciences, law and cultural studies. This complexity presents social work with particular challenges regarding its own professionalisation, which cannot be discussed in detail here (Lambers, 2013; Füssenhäuser, 2016). However, the opportunities offered by such an interdisciplinary approach are central to the challenges ahead. Political changes in a modern and increasingly complex world can only be achieved through strong partnerships, as addressed in the SDGs. This is why networks and trusting relationships at national and international levels are so important. One example of this is the subject-related partnerships (2029–2022) - now SDG partnerships (2023–2026) – a project funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) since 2019. To promote social development, stakeholders must join local, regional, national and international forces. A wide range of scientific disciplines must be involved, and actors from science, politics, business and civil society must

be brought together as a "collective impact" (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Raderstrong & Boyea-Robinson, 2016). As an interdisciplinary profession, social work is of particular importance here. This is the only way to achieve sustainable and effective change in line with the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. This is where social work has its task. It ensures that people have real, not just formal, opportunities. It can correct fates with measure and purpose!

At the micro-level, Global contexts influence people's lives locally, in the reality of their lives and their social spaces. Decades of neoliberal policies have widened the division of societies into rich and poor, healthy and sick, educated and uneducated. Some authors speak of the "exploitation of people and nature" in global capitalism, which has manifested itself as an "imperial way of life" (Brand & Wissen, 2017). Here, people are degraded to commodities, to human capital. A few people can thus live well at the expense of many (Dörre, 2019). Social work addresses the dignity of people in their uniqueness and their living space. In doing so, it tries to establish powerful support systems which, in the best case, enable people to be empowered to free themselves from their precarious living conditions in the long term and make a difference for future generations. In this way, local social work contributes to inclusion and participation. It has the task of empowering communities to generate sustainable effects on the lives of individuals. Participatory concepts are essential here, and the value of relationships is central (Walzer, 2016; Raniga, 2021). However, how can this succeed if local structures are unjust and exclusive? How can it be possible to support people when state institutions and structures accept inequality and consciously or unconsciously reproduce it? What does this mean for the relationship between social work and the state mandate?

If we look at the roots of liberation education in Brazil, for example, it becomes clear that social work is much more differentiated from a state mandate. Instead, it places the empowerment of the addressees to become politically responsible citizens at the centre of "liberation". The aim is to enable clients to recognise their problems as a consequence of structural and, thus, socio-political conditions and to change these powerfully (Boecker,

2023). Concepts of liberal social work in Germany, such as those discussed by Heiko Kleve (e.g. Kleve 2020), could be applied here. This is not a call by the profession for revolutionary resistance but a strong plea for the unconditional commitment of social work to the dignity of its clients. People have dignity and no price!

Conclusions and recommendations

The above discussion provides evidence of how diverse and complex the stakeholders of social work, social development and its related professions are involved in national and international interdependencies. Global developments and relationships cannot be separated from local changes and challenges. They influence each other and put social workers in specific social spaces under pressure to act. The global and local thus become "global". Since the 1990s, the scope for nation-state control has been severely limited (Lessenich, 2016; Bach, 2019) and has been influenced not least by the legacy of colonialism. Global power asymmetries, particularly between the countries of the "Global North" and the "Global South", make a critical reflection on existing power relations and their influence on social development along the lines of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals indispensable.

This implies a critical reflection on the "concept of sustainability", which has been considered almost exclusively in terms of its economic and ecological dimensions and not concerning its social consequences. This poses particular challenges for those involved in social work, as the above explanations should have clarified. Based on the positioning of its discipline as a human right and thus justice profession, social work cannot act nationally or internationally without the powerful shaping of its political mandate. The examples presented at the macro-, meso-- and micro-levels have clarified this and explicitly called for political action. In principle, the profession is well equipped for this. Based on its interdisciplinary orientation, social work aims to improve people's inclusion and opportunities for participation while addressing structures and unequal power relations. Social work focuses on

the reality of people's lives and considers their individual circumstances, environment, and conditions in which they were born. "It needs a whole village to raise a child". It involves its clients as experts in their cause and promotes the development of participatory structures and quality relationships.

At its core, social work is intra- and interdisciplinary. These aspects are needed to enable the target groups of social work to participate in the changes in their realities and to use the knowledge gained for further research and development. To this end, it is important to strengthen the national and international professional associations of social work and to influence existing concepts of development cooperation. In this sense, development cooperation does not mean combining existing power asymmetries with the help of economic policy objectives but instead shaping the major issues of the future together in a joint learning process. This remains a major challenge.

Last, the German sociologist Michael Hartmann (2007) points out in his empirical studies that the performance elites and, thus, the ruling classes mainly reproduce themselves from their milieu of origin. Consequently, this means that the impetus to change (social) state structures and production conditions cannot come from the ruling majority society and its reproduction through social work but must come from the people affected, as already critically summarised in our article. Social work and social science's task is to strengthen them and take a theoretical and empirical look at unjust power relations.

Some non-exhaustive aspects of future research activities could include the following points:

1. The distribution of poverty and wealth in the countries of the Global North and South and consequences for societies.
2. The Influence of colonial rule on the countries of the Global South
3. Racism and forms of discrimination are a challenge for social work professionals.

4. Social work as a human rights profession and the contribution to solving global problems along the lines of the Sustainable Development Goals.
5. Ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism as a challenge for the countries of the Global South.
6. The chances of a return to "indigenous" knowledge for the Global South and the Global North countries.
7. Building a foundation for future strategic cooperation and partnerships between higher education institutions.

Initial successes have been achieved in recent years, not only in the context of the funding already outlined by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). It is essential to build on those strategic partnerships along the SDGs and expand the network of strong partnerships between the actors of the Global South and the Global North. The profession of social work as a human rights profession has an important contribution to make here.

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