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Transcending boundaries on unequal ground: A critical reimagining of global North-South cooperation on social work practice and the Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

Using collaborative autoethnography, this article encapsulates the rich discourse that unfolded during a symposium titled: "Human Rights, The Sustainable Development Goals and Social Work Practice in Germany and Africa". The symposium was a testament to the collaborative synergy between Fachhochschule Dortmund in Germany, Midlands State University (MSU) in Zimbabwe, the University of Johannesburg, and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in South Africa. This scientific event was an academic convergence where researchers and postgraduate social work students shared research, experiences and insights from the Global North and South, offering a mosaic of perspectives on critical issues. It illuminated shared challenges that transcended geographical boundaries. Poverty, climate

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change, and social injustice were common but contextually unique across the three countries. In this paper, we employ critical and world systems theories to reflect on the symposium. The discussions and reflections underscore social work's strategic position to inform context-specific anti-poverty, climate change discourse, anti-racism and collaborative efforts to combat economic disparities. This paper encourages the power of sustainable partnerships, dialogue, and shared learning across geographical and socio-economic boundaries. Collaborative efforts between Global North and South universities provide a platform for cross-cultural learning and mutual capacity building amongst postgraduate students.

Keywords: transcending boundaries, global North-South, social work practice, Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

The concept of "Global North" and "Global South" refers to a system of classifying nations according to the socioeconomic, political and historical traits of development that define them. The Global North, broadly comprising the developed countries of Northern America, Europe, and some parts of Asia and Oceania, has achieved higher levels of wealth, democracy and human development. In contrast, the Global South, consisting of transitional and least-developed countries of Africa, Latin America, and Asia, has faced multiple challenges of poverty, instability and underdevelopment (Odeh, 2010). Therefore, it is essential to critically examine the causes and consequences of this global divide and the possible solutions and alternatives for a more equitable and sustainable development world.

The evolution of social work practice, education and research has been greatly influenced by the dynamics of globalisation and interaction across developed, developing and underdeveloped countries. Despite the unequal footing of nations, social work is a recognised academic field and profession in many nations. Chiefly, the profession promotes societal development, cohesiveness, and transformation. Despite being an interdisciplinary subject in its epistemology, social work has historically been examined from a relatively Eurocentric viewpoint, which has not always made it easier to

comprehend trends taking place in Global South countries (Masoga et al., 2021; Makhanya & Mzinyane, 2024). In this paper, we delve into the critical re-conceptualisation of international cooperation between the Global North and South university partnerships and integration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in social work practice. The current dynamics of collaboration between the Global North and the Global South need to be analysed and re-evaluated in light of the increasingly interconnected globe, especially concerning transformative social work and social development policy and practice.

Against this backdrop, we adopted collaborative autoethnography as the research design to encapsulate the rich discourse that unfolded during an international symposium in Johannesburg, South Africa, in July 2023. The symposium was titled "Human Rights, the Sustainable Development Goals and Social Work Practice in Germany and Africa". We adopted the world systems and critical theories to frame this study and further analyse the challenges and opportunities that were shared in a symposium by social work postgraduate students and researchers from Zimbabwe (Midlands State University), Germany (Fachhochschule Dortmund), South Africa (University of Johannesburg and University of KwaZulu-Natal). Significant lessons were learnt from the symposium as a learning and information-sharing platform, and it is worth this critical reflection. We herein highlight how differences and commonalities of different countries transcend geographic boundaries. Through our joint reflections, as authors from South Africa and Zimbabwe, we discuss how some historical power dynamics, disparities, and obstacles should be considered in attaining shared global goals and shared social work aspirations between the two worlds. Through these discussions, we, therefore, advocate for continued dialogue between the Global North and South university partners. We further advocate that the collaborations of the two aforementioned worlds should be able to bridge the historical epistemic divides to promote more equitable collaborations that aim at exploring solutions for the world at large.

Background issues

Global North-South cooperation has been crucial in addressing world issues and advancing social work education and sustainable development for many years. However, due to historical legacies, economic inequalities, and asymmetrical relationships, this cooperation can easily be characterised by uneven power dynamics. Focusing on advancing social justice and human rights, social work practice should take a proactive approach to tackling these issues and rethinking more fair and efficient forms of collaboration. Based on the definition of social work provided by the IFSW and IASSW in 2014, social work is a profession supported by theories from the social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledge (IFSW & IASSW, 2014). Thus, it is crucial to emphasise that IFSW and IASSW recognise the necessity of collaborating across several knowledge domains and contexts within the social work profession.

Given that social work may have originated from a European perspective, it is necessary to decolonise the field intentionally while taking heed of its interconnectedness within the global world. Arguably, international cooperation has been essential to developing social work as a profession in several nations. The social work profession is relevant worldwide, and pertinent issues such as social injustice, poverty, and climate change need urgent attention in both Global North and South countries. Makhanya and Mzinyane (2023) advocate for reorientating ideas imposed during the colonial era and transcending the bounds to achieve decolonisation and provide context-specific solutions unaffected by views from the Global North. The necessity of the call stems from the varied origins of the social and economic crises. In that sense, the field advances human rights, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

Conceptual framework

We explored various theories to conceptualise this paper critically and find the most suitable perspective. As a result, the conceptual framework of this article is based on two perspectives: world systems theory and critical theory. These theories were deemed relevant in analysing the two hemispheres'

resources, power relations, strengths, challenges and weaknesses, transcending geographical boundaries.

Sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein initiated the world systems theory in the 1970s (Chirot & Hall, 1982). This theory is a macro-sociological approach that explains the economic development and dynamics of the capitalist world economy by analysing the mechanisms of international relations and economic divisions between core, semi-periphery and periphery regions (Van Rossem, 1996). From another angle, this theory is described by So (1990) as a macro-sociological approach that views the world as a single socio-economic system composed of a core, periphery, and semi-periphery. In this paper, we employ the latter-described categories of countries to position Germany as the *core region*. *In contrast*, South Africa and Zimbabwe can be categorised as *periphery* or/and *semi-periphery* regions, respectively. The unequal footing of the four universities that participated in the symposium in an attempt to contribute to the SDGs, human rights, and social justice is herein analysed comparatively using this perspective. Herein, we argue that even though specific challenges are shared and transcend the geographic boundaries of the Global North and South, the context of Africa and Europe should be considered critically during all development debates, as well as the allocation of resources and opportunities. According to Van Rossem (1996: 508), this theory has developed as a fitting model for the comparative development of former colonies and colonial rulers. We also argue that this theory can be utilised as a general perspective in human development discourse. Moreover, this theory is also used to examine the power-related historical and structural factors that shape the global inequalities and dependencies among the four universities and their respective regions.

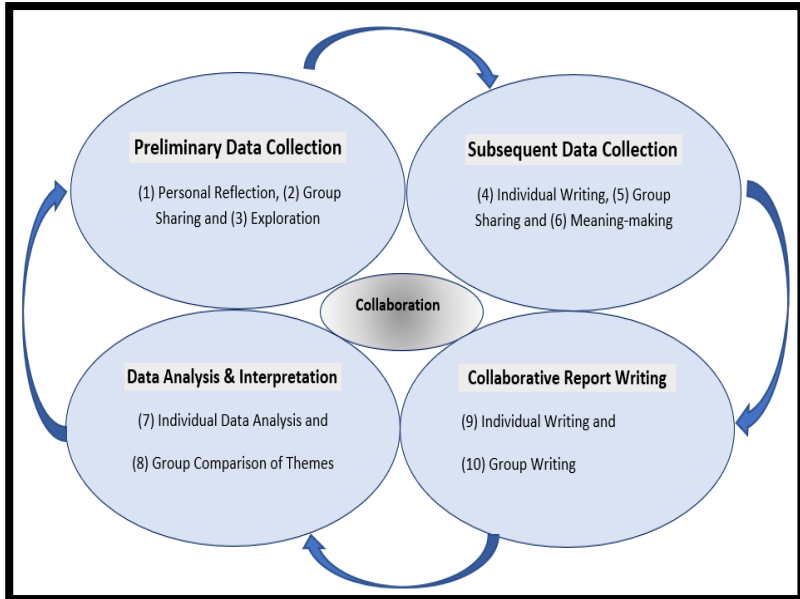
Expanding the critical perspective on issues of power and marginalisation, critical theory is also adopted for its philosophical and social perspective that critiques the dominant ideologies and power structures of society and aims to emancipate oppressed groups from exploitation and domination. Critical theory is helpful for social work, especially in a neoliberal world (Dlamini & Sewpaul, 2015). Herein, it is used to explore the ideological and discursive aspects of the partnership; from our perspective, we discuss epistemic issues

such as the values, norms, and interests that underlie the collaboration and the challenges it faces. It is argued that globalised partnerships and discourses of development between South-South nations and North-South require a critical and reflexive approach to address the complex and interrelated issues that face humanity, ranging from intrapersonal to structural challenges.

Methodology

In this study, we adopted collaborative autoethnography as our scientific lens, guiding this paper's conceptualisation and write-up. This qualitative research method has been gaining momentum in social work research in the Global South for its unconventional ability to allow authors to collaboratively reflect, examine and 'tell a story' about a specific phenomenon whilst maintaining scientific rigour (cf. Perumal et al., (2021); Ngcobo et al., 2023). Compatible with the intentions of this paper, this research method afforded us an opportunity to jointly reflect, document and analyse our subjective accounts of the symposium through an unrepresented voice. Motloutung and Mzinyane (2023) state that this methodology has three building blocks, namely: (a) collaboration; (b) autobiography– a reflection of oneself by self; and (c) ethnography– a study of culture, people, and differences. It is a research methodology based on personal experiences reflecting on social, economic, and political issues (Haight, 2018; Witkin, 2014). Auto-ethnography is the best approach to critically and subjectively analyse the complementarity of the Global South and Global North partnership and collaboration of Schools of Social Work across four universities in the fulfilment of global transformations through Sustainable Development Goals through the diverse lens of authors from Zimbabwe and South Africa (Hernandez-Carranza et al., 2021).

According to Chang et al. (2013), collaborative autoethnography empowers researchers to examine individual autobiographies collectively to understand a phenomenon. The execution of this method has four main phases with sub-activities. According to Ngcobo et al. (2013: 173), the phases of this module are as follows:



Adapted from: Ngcobo et al. (2023: 173)

Following the above framework, during the execution of the collaborative autoethnography, we also started our preliminary data collection phase through an informal conversation within a writing retreat setting, where authors were in a PhD exchange programme in Germany. All four authors reflected on the symposium as it had taken place during the past six (6) months of the initial joint reflections. After deciding to formalise the reflection process into a formal academic output, we decided to reflect individually and later shared our written reflections. We contextualised our thoughts within the framework of world systems and critical theories.

Transitioning to phase two, namely subsequent data collection, we started individual writing, where we wrote the article using the Google Docs application to share collaboratively and peer review (group share) each other's reflections. Importantly, during the group sharing process, we

endeavoured to make meaning of each author's reflections whilst each author was allowed to retain their personal versions of the symposium.

Additionally, we commenced the third phase of this method: data analysis and interpretation. The analysis started individually, and we decided to thematise our reflections individually. We re-converged to formulate a 'synchronised version of all reflections.' Upon completing this process, we proceeded to the joint write-up of the paper, which also took place in a Google Docs platform, allowing us to contribute to all the elements of the paper collaboratively.

Utilising this method allowed us to learn from each other's perspectives on the symposium while engaging in literature. The exchange of ideas (Hughes & Pennington, 2016) was pertinent to present intersections and outliers. Social work calls for the internationalisation of research, education, and practice, as SDG 17 calls for partnership development to attain the other SDGs. Coming from two different countries allowed us to jointly share ideas, theories, and indigenous knowledge systems of both the South and North. It was also a realisation that ideas can be shaped through globalised and regionalised collaborations where no one is left behind.

This method also allowed us to examine the intersections and peculiarities shared on a round table to enhance the self-sustenance and visibility of the social work fraternity in the fight for social, economic, and political issues globally. Lastly, collaborative autoethnography allows for research on personal journeys and contributes to insightful knowledge for social work practice, education, and research, allowing for different transformations in the Social Work discipline.

Colonialism and past histories' influence on contemporary economic globalisation discourse

The connection between one's identity and history is a crucial aspect of comprehending economic globalisation, which necessitates examining the discourse of colonialism and past events. Although we cannot change the past, studying history offers valuable insights and a foundation for shaping

our modern society. Given the complexity of this subject, we prioritise sharing key insights rather than attempting to give an analogy of historical events, including colonialism. While colonialism significantly impacted Africa, some countries in the "global north" also played a role in the process (Settles, 1996; Ocheni, 2012; Dimka, 2015; Arewa, 2023; Archibong, 2023). Conversely, these countries in the global north, despite not being colonised, have past histories that have entrenched inequality amongst them, such as wars and targeted racial discrimination. Although different, they have an impact on contemporary settings.

Our discussion will commence with the terms "Global North" and "Global South." "Global North" refers to affluent and influential nations worldwide. At the same time, the "Global South" encompasses countries in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, Brazil, India, and certain parts of Asia that were previously colonised. Despite achieving independence, the Global South continues to experience the aftermath of colonialism, with its predominantly youthful populace residing in economically reliant countries (Harden, 2022). Therefore, it can be argued that economic globalisation and its impact are historically rooted and thus marred by the complexity of integrating these areas without addressing the baggage of past histories and colonialism.

Economic Globalisation and Zimbabwe

Economic globalisation in Zimbabwe has a rich history traceable to the pre-colonial era. The Kingdom of Mapungubwe traded with Portuguese explorers. Over time, trade routes were established with distant regions—China, India, the Middle East, and East and West Africa (Mhlanga, 2014). This led to a thriving trade network exchanging a wide range of goods. During the colonial era, Zimbabwe, formerly known as Rhodesia, implemented a development strategy that was segregatory. The white minority was privileged in comparison with the black majority. The country's approach to social services was binary, too. Political and social rights were based on privilege.

At independence, Zimbabwe inherited this divided economy with unequal access to social services between blacks and whites despite the majority of the population being black (Zhou, 2006; Marawanyika, 2007). To address these inequalities and challenges, the government adopted pro-people policies (Growth with Equity, 1981; Transitional National Development Plan 1982-85, 1982) that aimed to treat everyone equally, resulting in a real and positive difference in people's lives. These policies also shaped the direction of engagement with other countries. However, the policies eventually became unsustainable. In 1990, the government launched the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) to transition the economy from regulated to liberalised. Unfortunately, ESAP failed to achieve its objective due to poor program support, lack of consultation, and external factors such as poor policy advice and the global economic recession (Sibanda & Makwata, 2013). This resulted in social unrest and increased corruption.

Zimbabwe attempted to improve its economy by adopting the Zimbabwe Programme for Economic and Social Transformation (ZIMPREST) plan in 1996. However, the government's actions from 1996 to 2000 went against the plan and worsened the economy. A 50,000 Zimbabwean dollars payment to 60,000 veterans and long-term pensions undermined confidence in fiscal policy. On "Black Friday", the Zimbabwe dollar lost 71.5% of its value against the US dollar, and the stock market crashed by 46% (Marawanyika, 2007). The seizure of white-owned farms in 1998 further worsened the situation and led to global sanctions. These sanctions have affected trade and investment in the country, highlighting the relationship between Zimbabwe and part of the global north.

It can be argued that early policies delivered moderate success despite some shortcomings. Still, policies from 1996 to 2008 (war veteran payments, participation in the Democratic Republic of Congo civil war, fast-track land reforms, the 2007 price reduction directive, and indigenisation laws) were disastrous, resulting in hyperinflation and economic collapse (Sibanda & Makwata, 2017). This led to South African intervention and the formation of a Government of National Unity, stabilising the economy. The Indigenization Law stalled as no investor is interested in investing in an operation where

51% ownership can be taken without proper sale arrangements. This also promoted the mass exodus of Zimbabweans to other countries seeking greener pastures, highlighting some opportunities that EG could present (Sibanda & Makwata, 2017). Against this background, how can social work contribute to an interconnected world and create positive change?

Economic vulnerabilities and social injustice are tied to historical narratives and global factors. In Zimbabwe, social work practice has been shaped by colonial history, leading to a focus on individualistic methods. The profession must embody African identity to remain relevant by moving towards Afrocentric approaches besides the dominant Eurocentric perspectives. This balanced view can help social work tackle modern challenges, including economic globalisation. Moreover, there is a need for more assertiveness in advocating for socio-economic rights. Social workers should be more engaged in policy formulation and budgeting to promote sustainable development. Social workers play a vital role in ensuring that economic globalisation processes do not continue to maintain historical inequalities between natives and foreigners. While economic globalisation presents several opportunities, it could also exacerbate power imbalances and neo-colonialism. Therefore, it is essential to be mindful and cautious of such factors.

The legacy of imperial oppression in South Africa

The development connection between countries of the global North and global South, especially African countries, is historically characterised by a persistent gap and inequality in economics, human security, epistemic hegemony, the political power of influence, expropriation of mineral resources, and military strengths. This gap in development can be traced back to the historical patterns of inequality, colonial rule and structural oppression that have shaped these regions' economic, social and political conditions. As categorised in the World Systems Theory as our theoretical framework, it is noteworthy that numerous countries in the global North are regarded as core, whilst most countries in the global South are either periphery or semi-periphery.

Specific to the Republic of South Africa, the country experienced both colonialism and apartheid. As a result, the impact of colonialism and apartheid on poverty in South Africa is a complex issue. According to Patel (2015: 32), “Both colonialism and apartheid shaped the evolution of the nature, form and the content of social welfare policy in South Africa”. As a result, the state of human security, social development and welfare in South Africa is still bearing the imperceptible but impactful effects of the colonial and apartheid legacies in the country. Hallink (2021) argues that “until we reckon with the legacies of colonial social welfare legislation, the existing unemployment security system will continue to reproduce stratification and socio-economic inequality”. During apartheid and colonialism, non-whites [blacks, Indians and coloureds] were disproportionately getting less to no state social welfare support, as compared to white South Africans (Patel, 2005). Viljoen & Sekhampu (2013) encapsulate how policies of the colonial and union governments in pre-democratic South Africa were directed at the extraction of cheap labour, state-driven underdevelopment of non-whites, legislated dispossession of natural resources and systemic exclusion for the majority of South Africans which was built upon by apartheid legislation (Viljoen & Sekhampu, 2013). This meant that generational wealth and institutionalisation were favouring the white minority. Due to this systemic injustice, Jablonski et al. (2015) argue that the colour of poverty in South Africa is black, attested by the majority of black South Africans who live below the poverty line.

As a result, there is a need for scholars, practitioners, and educators in prominent fields of human development, such as social work, to reckon with, advocate for, and remain conscious of the legacy of apartheid and colonialism. The legacy of apartheid has had a profound impact on social work practice, research, and education in South Africa. The apartheid system was characterised by institutionalised racism, segregation, and discrimination, which resulted in significant social and economic inequalities that persist to this day (Patel, 2005). The social work profession in South Africa has been shaped by the legacy of apartheid, with social workers

playing a critical role in addressing the social and economic challenges facing the country after the eras of institutionalised oppression (Patel, 2005).

The end of apartheid in 1994 marked a turning point for social welfare in South Africa. The new government introduced a range of democratic and progressive legislation, policies, and social assistance programs which have attempted to provide a safety net for the disadvantaged (cf. Gray and Lombard, 2008). However, the legacy of colonialism and apartheid continues to shape the country's social welfare system, and there is still much work to be done to address the ongoing challenges of poverty and inequality in South Africa. Conversely, Gray & Lombard (2008: 135) argue that despite social workers' difficulties in the first decade of democracy, they have remained committed to the developmental approach". Due to the legacy of colonialism and imperialism, Makhanya & Mzinyane (2023) argue that, even though transformation in social work is preceding, the architecture of social work knowledge is still dominated by Euro-American ideas, theories and methods. As a result, these authors call for the emergence of voices of the global South. Beyond the distinct challenges of South Africa and Zimbabwe, there has been a transformation in the international agenda concerning the global development goals. The following section discusses such evolution.

Progression of the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were eight, targeting livelihoods and basic needs of developing countries, and lapsed in 2015, mainly targeting the poor (Diouf, 2019). According to Sachs (2012), the shortfall of MDGs was mainly due to operational failures by many stakeholders in both poor and rich countries. The MDGs were unmet and extended to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), extending Agenda 2030 (Jeremic & Sachs, 2014; Servaers, 2017). This suggests that cooperation and collaboration between the Global North and Global South is not new but a global complementary commitment in the fight against social injustices and ensuring sustainability in three pillars-social, economic, and environmental. However, the two cover similar problems with no complete

shift, only that the SDGs are more comprehensive (Vandemoortele, 2017). Also, the MDGs were not as consultative to people at the grassroots as the SDGs. A major difference is that the Global North and Global South were completely split under the MDGs. In contrast, SDGs are universal and complementary, evidenced by the commitment of developed nations to assist developing countries. However, there has been a realisation that there are fewer delivery targets for the Global North than for the Global South.

Through mutually reinforcing the interrelated SDGs, the United Nations has put in place inclusive initiatives for all with region-specific targets where nations report their progress. The SDGs cut across all disciplines, including social work, due to the SDG's effect on various client groups' social functioning and coping capacity. SDGs have input from both the Global North and Global South. SDGs moved the international community to a sustainable trajectory, combining economic development, environmental sustainability and social inclusion. According to Nhapi and Pinto (2023), the SDGs call for interdisciplinary collaborations and partnerships in which social work is central to sustainable development achievements at the global level.

Global transformation is a crucial facet of SDGs as inclusion, participation, embracing Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and knowledge sharing are drawn from research and comparatives of the two contexts. Therefore, the global exchange and partnership for development should be interrogated in social work institutions, and results that can be fruitful for this transformation should be presented. MDGs and SDGs realised that men are insecure and feel threatened by the challenges they face due to human-induced activities, especially climate change.

Reflections: Lessons from the symposium

As discussed in the methodology section, herein are our reflections regarding the lessons we drew from the symposium.

Author 1: Nomusa

Inequalities are not exclusive to the Global South but also permeate the Global North; various social and economic disparities are evident in the

Global North. The historical predominance of Western methods of knowledge production has been identified as a critical obstacle supporting the Global South. One can quickly figure out the generational gap in information sharing from the symposium. This could be an indication of the impact of Western Imperialism on indigenous systems of knowledge production. In tandem with this, the world's interconnectedness has been construed as the main cause of African problems, hence the call for decolonisation and adopting African means of problem-solving. However, no profession can live in a vacuum, thus the need for globalisation and maintaining the interconnectedness of the profession. Through the symposium, the decolonisation and indigenisation of social work education, knowledge, and practice became increasingly evident, especially in social justice, human rights, social cohesiveness, and indigenous knowledge. It was fascinating to observe how the ideas of globalisation and decolonisation were dissected and intersected throughout the symposium. In other words, the interdependence of the two opposing concepts, globalisation and decolonisation, shaped and enabled the social work profession to be globally competitive. During the symposium, the nexus between Global North-South was evident as social and economic challenges like poverty, climate change, social justice, and human rights characterise the two divides. Yet, they are distinct in terms of where they originate. To advance the Social Development Goals, the two divides also intersect to push the global agenda.

Author 2: Tapiwa

Countries across the Global North and Global South may have apparent differences, but they share a common factor: their people. This diverse clientele base is served by social workers who deal with social justice, racial discrimination, and poverty. These issues are present in both contexts but are distinguished by contextual factors such as past histories. Social workers in practice equally face similar problems, such as inequalities in employment opportunities, salary scales, professional recognition, and collaborative efforts. They grapple with poverty, drug and substance abuse, disability issues, sexuality issues, social protection issues, climate change, mental health, bereavement, and grieving.

The DAAD Exchange program provided insights on bringing social workers together in different contexts to collaborate towards transformative practice and the United Nations' Agenda 2030. While recognising social workers' burden of service, there is a leeway for collaborative partnerships for interventions at the micro, meso, and macro levels of practice. One key attribute from the symposium was the need for social workers to care for each other in the true ethos of 'Ubuntu' - I am because you are. This fully realises that social workers cannot serve when they are not served. There is a need for self-care and collective bargaining in addressing challenges that social workers face, such as income disparities. This allows for strengthened agency, which can objectively respond to social injustice and inequalities in the Global South and Global North.

During the symposium, my colleagues composed a heartfelt poem that emphasised the interdependence of the client-social worker relationship. The poem reminded us always to respect our clients' individuality and human dignity, as social workers can also find themselves in similar circumstances. The message was clear: "Hear me, see me, I could be you!" It is important to remember that social workers are also people who may go through difficult times. Nevertheless, they are always available to serve. So, to all social workers: "I hear you, I see you, I could be you!". The importance of exchange learning and collaboration cannot be overstated. We must expand the program to improve social work practices and align them with the Sustainable Development Goals. This will ultimately lead to transformative changes and enable us to learn and draw more from one another.

Author 3: Bongane

Participating in the symposium held at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa, in July 2023 served as a wake-up call to me concerning the shared goals and challenges of the world, especially for global social work. The symposium was a culmination of a formalised partnership, funded by DAAD, between the Fachhochschule Dortmund in Germany, Midlands State University (MSU) in Zimbabwe, the University of Johannesburg (UJ), and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in South Africa. As for me, I hail

from the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, where I am a PhD candidate and a social work lecturer. Through the presentations by colleagues in the symposium, I noted shared challenges we face as researchers, social workers and postgraduate students from the global North and South.

Despite the differences in the contexts of these countries, the symposium revealed that systemic racism is a subtle but pressing concern in Germany. German students shared their professional interactions with asylum seekers and refugees from Ukraine. In their presentation, they mentioned how non-white refugees were mistreated and received in Germany during the crisis of the Russia-Ukraine war. They also highlighted the critical role they played as social workers in advocating and offering trauma counselling to these non-white refugees with whom they would interact. Hearing their accounts as South African black citizens provided lessons that Germany and South Africa could be in different hemispheres. Still, their systemic and historic discrimination challenges are pertinent in the current era. Importantly, our interaction with them highlighted the imperative of addressing deeply entrenched prejudices that still exist in our world and the significant role of social work practice in fostering social justice, sustainable development goals and human rights.

As the symposium proceeded, I noted that social work researchers and students from South Africa and Zimbabwe resonated with the discrimination concerns. Thus, this recognised the global resonance of the struggle against systemic discrimination. From the presentations of students from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), poverty, COVID-19 and climate change disasters took centre stage, with participants describing the devastating impact of floods and extreme weather events on vulnerable communities. These presenters provided their experiences as community engagement practitioners who interacted with victims of the notorious 2022 KZN floods and the COVID-19 pandemic, which served as a concurrent disaster for the people of KZN. The dire need for climate-resilient social work interventions was evident from their presentations, emphasising the urgency of incorporating climate justice into social work practice.

Poverty was a shared challenge in KZN and Zimbabwe, albeit manifesting differently due to unique socio-economic landscapes. These discussions underscored the importance of context-specific anti-poverty strategies and context. The symposium illuminated the need for continued partnerships between different stakeholders of the world social work but through equitable epistemic relations between partner universities because the world had for a long time been using solutions from the global North to solve problems of the global South, sometimes in ignorance of the context and indigenous knowledge system.

The symposium offered a mosaic of critical issues and perspectives, transcending geographical boundaries. The symposium illuminated the need for context-specific anti-poverty strategies, climate-resilient social work interventions, and the struggle against systemic racism, poverty, disasters and climate change. These insights helped me appreciate the need to work regionally and globally together to create a more equitable and just world.

Author 4: Sunungurayi

Whilst poverty is a universal SDG, it is exceptionally subjective in Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Germany, and there is a noticeable difference in the insufficiency level from the presentations made at the University of Johannesburg at the DAAD symposium. The candidate also noted that student-teacher auto-ethnography interaction is critical for constructing valuable and new knowledge where there is a sharing of social, economic, and environmental challenges affecting the micro-, meso- ---, and macro-levels. The exchange was very insightful, and in Germany, from the presentation of migration as a challenge, the student realised that problems to do with inequality in the treatment of service delivery for migrants are evident, which also calls for reduced inequalities. Climate change caused displacements in UKZN and damaged infrastructure, and lessons were drawn from social workers at ground level and from Germany. It was highlighted that people feel that climate change-related fatalities are few compared to developing countries. Economic globalisation seems to be an unexplored area in social work, as I learned from the Zimbabwean candidates'

presentations on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on families. An interrogation was insightful when also looking at the accessibility of goods and services for the social functioning of families.

Synchronised reflections and implications for social work

Based on the narratives of the four authors, social work is a profession that depends on the cooperation of the Global North and South. In our reflections above, we refer to the necessity of strengthening partnerships and collaboration within the social work profession, drawing from the symposium's theme of "Human Rights, the Sustainable Development Goals and Social Work Practice." As a result, we emphasise that the social work profession must remain interconnected despite the calls for its indigenisation. Furthermore, we jointly pointed out that despite the two divides' different geographical location and origin, we have encountered nearly indistinguishable challenges, although we come from different countries. Therefore, based on the narratives, the challenges are characterised by racial discrimination, poverty, social injustice, and climate change. To handle such challenges arising from the nexus of political (power issues), social, environmental and economic factors, the profession aims to establish partnerships worldwide in this respect. As social work academics and practitioners, we advocate for context-specific anti-poverty strategies and climate-focused social work interventions due to the variations in the origins or locus of the problems that characterise the two divides (Global North and South). This emphasises how important it is for social workers to develop context-specific remedies that respond to the Global South challenges.

Recommendations

we made the following recommendations:

1. We propose promoting critical reflection within Social Work, where critical theory and anti-colonial frameworks would be integrated into social work education, research and practice to challenge power imbalances and advocate for social justice in all areas.

2. We recommend strengthening the South-South, North-North and North-South collaborations. This can be achieved by facilitating exchange programs, joint research initiatives, and capacity-building workshops to promote cross-cultural learning and mutual aid.
3. We also posit the development of context-specific solutions in all the collaborations and proposed solutions for the global South and North.
4. We further advocate for social work approaches grounded in local realities and empower communities to address their unique challenges.
5. We recommend that schools of social work within different regions and countries leverage technology. This can be achieved by utilising online platforms and communication tools to facilitate ongoing dialogue, knowledge sharing, and collaborative action beyond physical borders.

By implementing these recommendations, social workers can continue to transcend boundaries and work together to build a more just and equitable world. As the symposium exemplifies, this collaborative spirit holds immense potential to contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and creating a brighter future for all.

Conclusion

The "Human Rights, The Sustainable Development Goals and Social Work Practice in Germany and Africa" symposium was a crucial platform for fostering dialogue and collaboration between social workers across the Global North and South. Through critical autoethnographic reflections, this article has highlighted the symposium's key takeaways and potential pathways for future engagement. Challenges such as poverty, climate change, and social injustice are shared among different countries, although their manifestation depends on different regions' contextual nuances. Critical discussions: In this paper, we emphasise the strategic role of social work in addressing these challenges through anti-poverty, anti-racism, and climate change interventions. The power of collaborative partnerships, dialogue, and shared learning across geographical and socio-economic boundaries was recognised as a potent force for transformation.

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