Challenges for Social Work: Global Agenda for Social Workers

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21st Century Challenges to Social Work

Challenges to social work – opportunities for development and barriers:

• Lie in the contexts in which practice occurs.
• Include traditional issues like poverty and professionalisation and ‘new’ social problems including disasters like climate change.
• Intensify the ‘politics of practice’.
• Globalisation in bringing people together (especially virtually) and pitting them against each other (over resources).
• Promoting local identities including indigenisation, especially as people react against the West’s ‘Orientalist’ approach.
• Developing professionalism and professional identities.
• The ‘new’ managerialism and the bureaucratisation of practice.
• Social movements and the affirmation of service user voices.
• Internationalisation of social problems from trafficking to disasters including climate change.
• Having an impact – ‘making a difference’ in ways that improve people’s well-being and care for the environment.
Social workers have to work within, manage and challenge the ‘politics of practice’. Can we do it? Yes, we can!
Areas of concern to progressive social workers:

• Human rights violations.
• An economic system that perpetuates inequalities and lacks corporate accountability.
• The neglect of cultural diversity and non-affirmation of aboriginal and indigenous lifestyles.
• Lack of people-friendly localities and supportive community relationships.
• Lack of provision for the health and well-being of people.
• Lack of care for the physical environment.
• Lack of recognition of the interdependency among peoples and between people and the geo/ecosystem.
Areas for Priority Action

Social workers have identified their priority areas as:

- Promoting social and economic equalities.
- Promoting the dignity and worth of peoples.
- Working toward environmental sustainability.
- Strengthening recognition of the importance of human relationships.

Add: enhanced professionalisation and research base.

This requires social workers to:

- Work for social justice, the affirmation of human rights, and empowerment of marginalised individuals, communities and groups.
- *Take a stand* in favour of *empowering just practice*.
- Engage with all forms of disasters from poverty to environmental degradation.
- Improve education and training including research methods.
Empowering just practice tackles the oppression of people and degradation of the environment.
Organisations Social Workers Influence

To promote empowering just practice, social workers seek to:

• Speak with a united voice to influence United Nations and its related agencies, e.g., UNICEF
• Empower local organisations to lobby national governments
• Develop capacity and strengths in local communities to influence decision-makers
• Collaborate with civil society organisations
• Support the development of environmentally-friendly and people-centred economic systems
• Hold corporate decision-makers accountable for their treatment of community residents, workers, and the physical environment
• Engage in developing healthy and sustainable lifestyles
• Promote research-led education and practice
Defining disasters

Disasters are ‘natural’ and (hu)man made phenomena that cause severe disruptions to daily life routines. They are usually serious and require external intervention or assistance.
Types of Disasters

There are many different kinds of disasters:

• ‘Natural’ disasters include:
  – Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, landslides, floods.

• (Hu)man-made disasters include:
  – Poverty, armed conflict, pollution, over-urbanization (mega-cities lacking public health infrastructures and utilities), industrial accidents, e.g., Bhopal, environmental crises caused by deforestation of tropical and temperate rainforests, climate change.
The Origins and Spread of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami
The Future of Disasters

• Disasters are likely to increase in frequency and intensity.
• Climate change is likely to exacerbate ‘natural’ disasters like earthquakes, flooding and heat waves and droughts.
• The boundary between ‘natural’ disasters and (hu)man-made ones is becoming blurred.
Social workers were involved in all stages
Factors that affect interventions

Social workers’ interventions shaped by:
• Value base
• Type of disaster
• Resources available (people, environmental, material)
• Political structures
• Cultural traditions including religion and language
• Power relations at the interpersonal level
• Ethnicity
• Gender
• Class
• Age
• Disability
• Sexual orientation
Cycle of Intervention in Disaster Situations

Differentiated Experiences of Disasters

• IFRC (2009) states that 76 per cent of the damage caused by disasters is located in industrialising countries; 92 per cent of the people affected live in them; and 65 per cent of the economic losses are similarly based there.

• Poor people are the worst affected, whether in rich countries, e.g., Hurricane Katrina in the USA, or in poor countries, e.g., Haiti’s earthquake.
The Shape of the New World Order

Source: Calculations are based on Hutton (1995:109) and ILO (2000). For further details, see note (3).
Classism

- Class is the new taboo and rarely talked about.
- Poverty is its key expression.
- In 2006, 946 individuals held $3.5 trillion between them. Most were men, 40 per cent were American. The three richest had more wealth between them than 48 poorest countries (Kroll and Fass, 2007).
- In 2009, they exceeded 1000 despite the recession.
- By 2011, billionaires from China, India and Russia were challenging American hegemony on the Forbes’ List of Billionaires and their number had risen to 1,226 (Kroll and Fass, 2012).
Anti-Poverty Measures

• High levels of poverty amongst children and women are evident in both the Global North and Global South.

• Globally, the United Nations (UN) has created the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that aim to:
  – Halve poverty by 2015.
  – Deal specifically with the needs of women and children, especially in relation to education and health.

• These MDG goals are NOT expected to be met because adequate resources have not been allocated for the task.

• Even all funds promised under the ‘Make Poverty History Campaign’ have not been delivered and Africa continues to be the continent that is failing to develop industrially.

• Responses to natural disasters reveal the public’s desire to demonstrate social solidarity to those in distress, but government refuses to act in similar measure, e.g., tsunami responses.

• Exposing government’s failure to classify its support for business as corporate welfare by dressing this penchant up as enhancing competitiveness in a global economy and defining welfare as state support given to individuals (Bartlett and Steele, 1998).

• Governments lack the appetite for addressing these problems. This is a political choice, not an economic necessity.
Homeless People Know the Score: Governments Subsidise Corporations, Not Poor People

**Individual Welfare**

**Corporate Welfare**
Environmental Degradation

• Community social work is useful in addressing poverty resulting from low wages and environmental degradation as occurs in this slum in Bogata where multinational firms mine gold and emeralds.

• Let’s get back to the profession’s past (*Barclay Report*)! 
The BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico or Deep Water Horizon spill cost lives and damaged the environment in the summer of 2011. Social workers picked up the pieces.
Corporate needs over-ride human needs
States are reluctant to control other states

- States are reluctant to challenge other nation-states because the principle of national sovereignty is held to be supreme.
- Nation states are also reluctant to challenge global corporations because:
  - ‘jobs depend on them’ and because
  - ‘we must remain competitive’.
- These are poor excuses, and imply a ‘race to the bottom’.
- And people continue to suffer.
- Nation-states have a ‘duty to protect’.
- Social workers can support people who challenge the status quo, but need to be fully informed if they are to move beyond ‘picking up the pieces’.
Environmental Degradation Impacts on Food Chain
‘Duty to protect’ challenges state sovereignty

- ‘Responsibility to Protect’ was promoted by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty in 2000.
- It was used in Myanmar/Burma when Cyclone Nargis devastated large swathes of the country in 2008.
- The UN Security Council (UNSC) can threaten or use ‘armed force without the agreement of the target state to address a humanitarian disaster caused by grave, large-scale and fundamental human rights violations’ (Perez and Thompson, 1994), but rarely does this.
- Social workers can help people mobilise to uphold their rights, but it is risky business.
‘Failure to Protect’: Marginalised, Humiliated and Dead, the Price of Vulnerability
Social workers have impossible tasks to face in refugee camps, but they rise to the challenges.
The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines vulnerability as:
‘The degree to which a system is susceptible to, and unable to cope with, adverse effects of climate change, including climate vulnerability and extremes. Vulnerability is a function of the character, magnitude, and rate of climate change and variation to which a system is exposed, its sensitivity and its adaptive capacity’ (IPCC quoted in UN, 2006:11).

The UN has also drawn on the ISDR (International Strategy for Disaster Reduction) to define vulnerability as:
‘The conditions determined by physical, social, economic and environmental factors or processes, which increase the susceptibility of a community to the impact of hazards’ (ISDR quoted in UN, 2006: 11).

• Social workers work with vulnerability everyday, but are unable to do anything about structural vulnerabilities without engaging politicians in the discourses of everyday life in which service users live.
• Addressing disasters is an area in which politicians sometimes listen to what social workers say. More action is needed to be heard fully.
Developing strengths and resilience

Social workers often emphasise community strengths and developing resilience amongst people individually and collectively:

Gubbins (2010:8) defines resilience as:

- communities having the confidence, capability, resources, knowledge and skills to address adverse factors affecting their cohesion and development. These factors include dramatic events such as extreme weather events; energy cost spikes; blackouts and energy insecurity; and national financial crises; as well as more chronic issues such as rural depopulation; fuel poverty; ageing communities; urban deprivation and unemployment.
Community Vulnerabilities and Resilience

Sichuan, China, May 2009
Social workers offered immediate support, but where is the long-term response?
Listening to Local People

- Effective listening skills are crucial to working with people who are poor, marginalised, and socially excluded.
- Although it is a core social work skill, it is often not practised well.
- Experts think they know better.
- The same thing happens in disaster interventions.
Crisis strike ordinary people in their everyday life activities. This is the site where social work practice occurs. It can become the site for action!

Ordinary people are not milch cows. They need resources, support and mobilisation.
• Social workers can use Articles 22-27 of the UDHR to alleviate poverty and affirm well-being.
• Article 25 of the UDHR ensures the standards of living adequate for human health and well-being.
• Article 25 locates humanitarian interventions in a human rights framework.
• The principles underpinning individual human rights can clash with those of state sovereignty when the state, responsible for upholding human rights violates them by what it does or not do.
• Article 2(1) of the UN Charter affirms state sovereignty as agreed at the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States under the auspices of League of Nations in 1933.
• State sovereignty is often invoked to assert non-intervention in armed conflict requiring a humanitarian responses, e.g., Syria; and in the refusal to accept claims by asylum seekers and (im)migrants.
Social work tasks in alleviating hardship involves:
• assessing need
• co-ordinating and delivering goods and services
• working with diverse organisations and governments
• assisting in family reunification (including in substitute families where appropriate)
• supporting individuals and communities in rebuilding their lives, developing resilience and building capacity to minimise risks for future hardship and/or disasters, and
• advocating, lobbying and mobilising for change that aims to prevent hardship/disasters in future.
• promoting individual, community and environmental well-being.
Community Social Work in Action:
Gilesgate Energy Exhibition and Prize Giving Event, 25 August 2011
Conclusions

• Do social workers want to mirror society or act as its conscience?
• Social workers can choose whether to respond to the challenges of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century or remain in their established ‘maintenance’ practices, ticking the boxes and running no risks with their own prospects.
• If they decide to respond to the complex and difficult challenges, they need to act to ensure:
  • High levels of proficiency and skills as a worker
  • Human rights
  • Social justice
  • Environmental justice
  • Social action that advances the well-being of people and the earth’s geosystem, flora and fauna
  • Corporate accountability
  • Accountability from politicians for the decisions they make
  • Alliances with diverse peoples and across many levels of action
  • Disciplinary boundaries to stake out the claims of the profession and work with others in different academic subjects and agencies.
Thank You for Listening

Questions?

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Shaped by the past, creating the future