

Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development: Voices of the social work educators from Asia

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Abstract

Social work is contextual yet increasingly internationalized. The development of Global Agenda in 2012 by the IASSW, ICSW and IFSW gave educators and practitioners an opportunity to reflect on challenges of social work education and the profession in their respective countries. The current article discusses the key factors that confront and influence social work education and practice in the Asian region. The article brings out deep-rooted perceptions amongst educators in the region. The authors endeavour to present select views of social work educators from South Asian countries and suggest possible steps to realize the four goals of Global Agenda in the context of those countries.

Keywords

Global Agenda, narratives, social work educators, social work values, South Asia

Introduction

Global Agenda is the product of a three-year collaborative process undertaken by IASSW, IFSW and ICSW. The three international social work, education and social development bodies have committed to working together with the United Nations to address the crucial problems perpetuating poverty, inequality and unsustainable human environments. The Agenda document was formally launched marking World Social Work Day on 26 March 2012 at the UN offices in New York, Geneva, Santiago de Chile, Nairobi, and Bangkok. The three organizations intend during the period 2012–16 to focus combined efforts to strengthen globally the four areas or pillars stated below (www.globalsocialagenda.org):

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

The Global Agenda Observatory has been launched to realize and promote the vision and to monitor and report on the implementation of the commitments of this agenda on the ground. The rationale of the Observatory over a 10-year period is to gather evidence about the activities of social workers, educators and social development practitioners, which supports the realization of the Global Agenda, in order to give visibility and credibility to their contributions and to promote further action. The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (The Agenda) is designed to strengthen the profile of social work and to enable social workers to make a stronger contribution to policy development (Jones and Truell, 2012: 454). The challenge is to build linkages between the global trends and realities, and to weave the local community response to the global process making it 'glocal initiative'. The global social work community has been involved in self-critiquing and revisiting of concepts and theory building (Nikku, 2012; Sewpaul and Jones, 2005) and we hope that the Global Agenda process further leads to the continued debates and self-reflections. These processes are vital for social work to survive and become relevant and resilient in an era of widespread global changes. Beginning with Hong Kong 2010, the Global Agenda process has caused an unprecedented level of engagement and debate around the world (IFSW, 2011). The immediate past president of the IASSW quotes:

While the current world situation requires an increased level of social work unity and engagement, it seems that social work voices are fragmented and our contributions are not often acknowledged. . . We need to organize ourselves around major and relevant social issues that connect within and across our profession. (Yuen et al., 2010: 734)

The critical element in relation to the Global Agenda is *how* to achieve the four stated goals in specially countries within South Asia and to an extent in South East Asia, and within the Asia Pacific region. The voices from these countries appear to connote that they are struggling to develop an identity for the profession and social work servicing seems to be controlled and co-opted by the state on one hand and on the other left to non-government agencies or organizations that may be dependent on charity raised within those countries and also abroad in developed countries. One of the crucial elements in the Global Agenda implementation is how to ensure representation of these countries. This article attempts to answer these questions through sharing social work educators' voices from South Asia. After describing the methodology of our research, we start with a brief introduction of Asia and review some of the core ideas behind the Global Agenda process followed by a discussion of results from an inquiry that we carried with the assistance of social work educators from South Asia.

Methodology and limitations

Originally the authors sent a questionnaire across professional associations and groups in the Asia Pacific region, particularly to the member schools and individual members of the Asian and Pacific Association for Social Work Education (APASWE) and the national associations of social workers of Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, Bangladesh, China, South Korea, India and Nepal. In addition, we have reached out to colleagues from the region to elicit their views through web tools. Eliciting adequate sample data from a large universe of social work

educators from a diverse region like the Asia Pacific on the Global Agenda process proved demanding for us. However, only 10 responses were received from the South Asian social work educators within the stipulated time, ending 30 March 2013.

We utilized a constructivist research orientation. 'Each constructivist study is considered unique to its time and place' (Morris, 2006: 209). This has allowed us to interpret the views of social work educators from Asia, through a wide variety of information sources including personal communications, limited literature reviews and content analysis of the emails exchanged with colleagues from the region. Despite the stated challenges, we were able to collate data from different sources and the analysis shows that important results have emerged. As part of this methodology those survey respondents who were willing to be interviewed further were contacted and the interview transcriptions have been utilized to add a qualitative dimension in this article. As authors we have reflected on our own personal experiences and we believe that we have followed the tradition of a 'quilter'. The quilter stitches, edits and puts slices of reality together. This process creates and brings psychological and emotional unity to an interpretative experience (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013).

We are aware that a response rate of 10 schools of social work or representative individuals is certainly low. This may also be due to lack of substantial dialogue on the Global Agenda and its implementation as it only began in earnest in the year 2012. It appears that there are some significant realities that hinder participation in qualitative research studies from this region. Munford et al. (2009) argued:

The problems confronting researchers in this region can be considered as issues of geographical and linguistic marginality. Geographical marginality is a serious issue for researchers in this region who may not have the resources to travel to meetings and conferences in North America and Europe. Qualitative research events are also relatively rare which means that there are few opportunities for researchers and practitioners to debate and advance qualitative practice in the region. (p. 420)

Diversity and development in Asia

In this section, we briefly discuss diversity, development and the challenges, successes, and prospects of social work and social development in the Asia region. Asia is not 'one', as Okakura (1904) once argued, and there is no singular idea of Asia. With the departure of colonialism from Asia after the Second World War, parliamentary or representative governments were installed in a number of the new Asian nations. The expansion of economies of East, South East, and South Asia over the last 20 years has been termed as one of the most striking periods of economic growth and development the world has experienced. Many scholars have tried to understand the diversity and dissimilarities of this region in terms of language, culture, beliefs, and economics politics. Diversities and differences among governments, people and cultures in this region are the norm rather than the exception. Acharya (2011) sums up the main features of this region:

Asia is of multiple (although not always mutually exclusive) conceptions . . . Some of these varied conceptions of Asia have shaped in meaningful ways the destinies of its states and peoples. . . At least four different conceptions of Asia can be identified in the early post Second World War period. These may be termed as Imperialist Asia, Nationalist Asia, Universalist Asia, and Regionalist Asia. A fifth conception, Exceptionalist Asia, though already incipient, was would emerge later as a major political force later. These categories are not mutually exclusive. (pp. 1–2)

Thus, Asia is a complex mixture of countries, each encompassing different cultures and cultural heritages, identities, religions, language groups, histories, and economic, political,

and social developments. Many of these countries have no direct experience of a welfare state which is unanimously regarded as essential to social work projects (Noble, 2004). The current socioeconomic, political and cultural situation in the region presents a number of challenges for social work education and practice in many countries. Social workers are faced with socio-economic, political and cultural challenges that require a great deal of innovation and motivation.

We make a case in this article that due to this diversity, population, cultures and other developmental issues of this region, implementation of the GA is of paramount importance for Asia. It is apparent that Asian social workers in general are interested in international social work and are actively committed to the GA process by taking lead interests in the social work and social development efforts worldwide. We believe that the opportunities to effectively increase their participation in global and regionally planned events that promote interaction and discourse amongst colleagues in social work such as the third and fourth World Conference on Social Work and Social Development to be held in Melbourne, Australia in 2014 and Seoul, South Korea in 2016 will also assist the effective appreciation of the GA agenda.

Several key factors have challenged and influenced social work education and practice within the South Asian region which is diverse in cultures and political regimes ranging from democracies to authoritarian rule. Social workers and social development practitioners within South Asia are active and committed to the professional values and vision. They appear to be making small but positive changes in the lives of clients and communities. In some countries in the region (Nepal, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Cambodia and Vietnam, for example) the limited number of schools along with their under-resourced social work educators and practitioners are trying their best to seek legitimate identity for social work as a profession and a societal value for their professional services. Some countries have opted to suppress human rights to accelerate development. In countries such as Sri Lanka and Nepal, the prospect of democratic transition and democratic consolidation is distinctly problematic due to local causes. Given that global forces are a reality and interest in the Asian region is increasing, social workers agree now to escape from globalization and its negative as well as positive effects. The tertiary education sector, and within that, social work education, has also been influenced to a great extent by neo-liberal ideologies. Munford et al. (2009) observe that 'geography, social, economic and political history, culture and religion have all played their part in determining the nature of social work practice and research in this vast region' (p. 419). Former Honourable Secretary of APASWE, Joseph Kwok, had the following to say about the growth of social work in the region:

The social work profession in the region is also growing as record numbers of colleges and universities in Asian countries are offering social work programmes. As an indication, the Asia and Pacific Association for Social Work Education (APASWE) has recorded the largest and fastest membership growth since 2005. . . We can have some optimism that social workers in the region are responding to regional challenges with a stronger sense of mission, clearer professional roles, more effective development strategies, enhanced solidarity and a renewed commitment in promoting a barrier free, inclusive and right-based society. (APASWE, 2008: 699, 704)

The APASWE reports that there are more than 300 schools of social work from more than 20 countries of the region that had become institutional members by the end of 2012 (APASWE, 2012). Some of these schools also became members of the IASSW. This evidence further suggests the growing interest of schools of social work and social work educators from this region in international social work. Making a critical observation on the role of APASWE in promoting social work education in the region, Kwok argues that:

. . . have some optimism that social workers in the region are responding to regional challenges with a stronger sense of mission, clearer professional roles, more effective development strategies, enhanced solidarity and a renewed commitment in promoting a barrier free, inclusive and right-based society. (2008: 704)

John Ang (2009), the current president of the IFSW Asia Pacific region, highlighted that common influences such as the spread of Christianity, the colonial legacy, the penetration of Confucian teaching in many societies, communist ideology and the impact of globalization are evident on social work development in China and the region. Tiong (2006) states that social work is not a homogenous entity in the region. Different models of social welfare and social work developed in the South Asia, South East Asia, East Asia, and the Pacific. There also appear to be limited interactions between the Asian schools in terms of joint projects, etc.

Contrasting with the Pacific schools

There are at least over a dozen national member associations of International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) actively participating in the global social work coming from the Pacific region. Matsuoka (2007) mentioned how changes in the Pacific region are shaping social work education and practice in Hawai'i. That the number of schools of social work from the region involved both within the region and in bilateral projects in support of social work education and training is rapidly growing shows further evidence of social work emergence in the region. Indigenous and non-Indigenous social work scholars examine local cultures, beliefs, values, and practices as central to decolonization (Gray et al., 2013). Efforts are also visible in building further scholarship by decolonizing and developing indigenous social work curricula and training within the Pacific region (Gray et al., 2010; Ling, 2007; Nikku, 2010a).

MacPherson (1996) wrote in the context of Papua New Guinea (which was under the colonial powers of Germany and Britain from the 1880s and Australian administration from 1884 and became independent in 1975) that 'self strengthening character of local social systems comes about only when resources, ideas and organizations are combined in such a way that the resources are renewed and increased, the ideas are reinforced, or if necessary corrected or adjusted in use'. The University of PNG was established in 1965 and in 1971 the first lecturer in social work was appointed (O'Collins, 1973). More recently, social work at Monash University in Australia set up institutional collaboration with the University of Papua New Guinea to strengthen the higher degree programmes, staff skills and to review teaching materials (Monash University, 2012). These partnerships are crucial for social work educators in this region to learn and share new teaching methodologies and trigger innovations in their workspace.

Social work educators associated with APASWE were active in the discussions and steering the process of the global minimum standards for social work education (in 2000–4) and in the current review of the international social work definition (see Sakaguchi and Sewpaul, 2011). The APASWE International Definition of Social Work Review Project supported by the Japan College of Social Work and IASSW has been welcomed for its intellectual considerations and practical contributions (Akimoto, 2011). A detailed discussion on the role and development of social work education and profession in the larger Asia Pacific region is beyond the scope of this article. However, the brief review of the social situation and emergence of social work within the South Asian countries context that is presented in this article underscores the gigantic challenges of these countries. These countries in Asia remain socially and economically active while their social work fraternity is committed to addressing the issues of underdevelopment and is looking forward to the crucial role that the APASWE can play in the GA process. Nepal attempted a discussion around a

national definition of social work (as social work is at a nascent stage) and also suggested that a regional social work definition in line with the region's diversity, need and aspirations, may perhaps be appropriate (Nikku, 2011). India for instance instituted a national conference agenda as an attempt to bring forward many schools of social work and practitioners to a conference and colloquia that will enable them to address standards, concerns and emerging issues of social work in India. While the discourse about the definition of social work triggered a robust response in the region, the Global Agenda does not appear to have been the topic of many documented debates.

Voices from Asia

The Global Agenda anticipates a twin process of internationalizing social work on one hand and simultaneously increasing the ability to responding to the local priorities and needs on the other. This process brings uneasy tensions to social work educators in South Asia in that their forms of understanding and appreciation of needs of social work within their countries and their abilities to discharge the functions domestically. In our survey, we asked social work educators to reflect upon the GA process in their respective countries. In total, 10 educators including the authors of this article responded from eight countries.

Profile of the participants

The profile of the 10 educators from Asia is that they range in their experience of teaching and or practice from five to 25 years, in the age range of 25 to 60 years of age. There were three academics who have contributed to social work teaching in their own countries and are currently working in South East Asia and the Pacific region. Both the authors of this article were trained in social work in India at different times (in the 1970s and 1990s) and have been working in different countries of the region, currently teaching and working in South East Asia and the Pacific, as well as having been involved for more than a decade in teaching in Nepal and India respectively. They have been actively engaged in social work strengthening in South Asia. In this study we have spoken to leaders or heads of schools, where possible, in social work and members who are actively involved in international social work. Though small in number, the collective view of these 10 voices on the GA process provides useful pointers. At the generic level these 10 voices including those of the authors emerge from Asia and clearly articulate comprehensive understanding of the GA process:

- That the process of globalization demands increased extensions of global networks, intensity of global interconnectedness, and the velocity of global flows and involvement of a multiplicity of actors; and
- That are interested in seeing how these global resolutions translate into local practice into action in their own communities and countries.

Narrative voices from South Asia

Bartley et al. (2011), writing in the context of New Zealand, explained that overseas-qualified social workers as members of a global profession experience both great international demand for their skills and unparalleled flows of professional transnationalism. A view that intense contact and exchange takes place between both sending and receiving societies (and perhaps others as well) allowing for the engaged social fields to merge is quite in order (Portes et al., 1999). As transnational migrant social work academics our observations and reflections about how global social work processes influence social work within the region are also reflected in this analysis alongside

views from the participants of this survey. We were engaged in patterns of interactions such as those mentioned that provided us with new creative opportunities to pursue alternatives to the conventional paths of settlement and gradual but inevitable assimilation. As social work educators we were aware of our own roles in nurturing social work students to become change agents in local contexts and continue to bring regional and global social work developments to the classrooms where we teach and share our ideas about social work and GA per se. It is this 'simultaneous embeddedness', a characteristic of transnational social work educators, that seems to have assisted us in creating a new social space for ourselves to continue our work both in teaching and learning and contribution to the global social work agenda.

Challenges in being a social work educator

There are immense challenges for a social work educator in the Asia Pacific region. A deep-rooted perception that was expressed by educators in the region is that commitment to direct practice is often insufficiently rewarded in academia. Many social work educators appear to shy away or remain (un)critical about practice. The following analysis provides our reflections with the respondents of this study.

A near unanimous concern emerged in our research regarding the difficulty of separating practice from teaching and indigenization processes and the perception amongst the respondents of this study that transition will continue for some time. A notion we gained from the respondents is that most social work educators in developing Asia can be located on a continuum on an academic–activist orientation with a great majority of them being at the academic end of the continuum. For some educators it is difficult to separate practice from teaching as their countries are going through transitions and conflicts and social work is yet to be recognized. For these social work educators, teaching social work is an art, science and passion (Nikku, 2010b). These are the social work educators who are working closely with a range of practitioners, bureaucrats and policy-makers who often do not have a clear idea about professional social work. This interdisciplinary engagement of the larger community and relevant stakeholders in Asia appears to be a promising step that could lead to more meaningful social development in the region. These academic–activist educators are also actively engaged with international social work agencies and play critical roles in translating the vision of the GA onto the ground. In this article, we argue that social work in the region has yet to establish frameworks based on their needs and codes of conduct and create further opportunities for transnational social work practice so as to lead in building transnational social work scholarship.

Social work educators in South Asia support this view. A senior academic in Indonesia, for instance, reflected that 'with fifteen years of experience it is their desire to catch up with new development in social work education and the lack of books in an Indonesian language is quite a threat'. Interestingly this observation was echoed by academics from throughout the region including a single Pacific response. The reality on the ground seems to be that evidently competing demands within their organizational contexts, limited time for research and emerging challenges constrain their updating of their research and chances of remaining on par with developments in the rest of the world. A young social work educator from Nepal who now pursues doctoral work in Australia reflects:

'The teller of tales is more important than tales': I think this describes our situation as educators and social workers in Nepal. After your call we have arranged a get-together of educators associated with colleges and universities to respond to these 'four pillars of global agenda of social work'. Probably this is the first time we have looked at something like this. We have not formed ourselves as a professional association, this is our first challenge. A second set of challenge is associated with continued education in social work,

we do not have people who have doctoral qualifications that are able to guide research and offer sound masters degree programs. . . And the third challenge is how do we respond to the rights issue or even raise it in this part of South Asia? So far as the global agenda of social work promoted by IFSW, IASSW and ICSW is concerned, most of the Nepalese social workers seem to be having little conceptual clarity on this. . . Social work educators perceive there are massive social and economic impacts of decade long Maoist insurgency in Nepal. In this transition phase, Nepal needs to develop a well planned framework of social and economic re-integration for Nepalese population.

Social work on the ground

Chan and Ng (2004) argued that 'it is important for social work teachers to adopt a holistic practitioner-researcher-educator role in their everyday practice in order to create the necessary impact to effect change' (p. 312). While the authors of this article do not disagree with the multiple roles that a social work educator is expected to deliver, it appears a daunting task for young social work educators with limited or almost absent mentoring opportunities in some of the transition countries in the region. Our respondents also lamented the lack of international understanding about their local issues and the lack of reporting on them either in media or in social work discourse, culminating in their inability to gain solidarity for prompting more awareness and taking up rights-based social work.

At the heart of the GA are notions of sustainable communities built upon the dignity and worth of people and their relationships. The development of regional strategies will also increase in importance within social work and is therefore prominent in the Agenda. According to them the development of regional key objectives will assist in creating focus within the regions and will also enable the global bodies to promote targeted regional need at world forums (Jones and Truell, 2012: 461). These certainly are not new ideals for social work core functions. According to a Sri Lankan educator:

Guiding principles are more like policy statements – can we do 100 percent? A beginning can only be made. It depends on how social work communities interpret them to bring it down to action plans at grass root levels through their programmes and activities. For example, inequality is reality in the world and political and power relationship is determining the socioeconomic status which is maintained through status quo. A social worker's intervention is to take risk related challenges. Are we ready? I am not sure if we are ready? It is unclear as to what would happen to us and working within the existing socio political environment?

Closely related is an issue of finding employment for the graduates of social work in South Asian countries. India appears to have done well in identifying social work skills as being appropriate for a number of community sector facilitative positions that are expected to marshal government programmes to the community. A senior social work educator from Bangladesh reflecting on social work scenario in his country mentions:

On the employment front, social work graduates in Bangladesh are mostly employed in NGOs, involved in diverse socioeconomic development programs undertaken by those NGOs. Social work graduates working in NGOs are generally called development workers. These social workers make a difference, however the programmes are not pervasive and do not cover the whole country.

Referring to issues of poverty and social work response in Bangladesh, the academic states:

Bangladesh is a poverty-stricken country and ideally the focus ought to be to reduce poverty by applying social work knowledge and skills. My feeling is that the current social work curriculum does not provide

students with adequate opportunities to become skilled and efficient so that they can contribute satisfactorily to socioeconomic development programs. I think a nationwide effort needs to be made to pull social work into the centre-stage so that what we teach as group work, social action and advocacy becomes a reality. Also due to lack of educational resources and access to global information in the field of social work, we are not very well aware about the Global Agenda process and what others have done in the world and this could be a reason as to why SAARC nations are not much linked into these processes.

Most nations within the region have social work taught in English but a move to teach social work in their native languages has begun. Absence of relevant translated texts and indigenous reflective writing appear to be general needs expressed by a number of our respondents. Indonesia, Nepal and north India are three examples in the Asian region where this need has been clearly articulated. Within the region more than ever before, social workers are facing challenges in defining their mission and their role in fostering social development in a region which is seeking consensus amid profound differences in pursuing development goals in a fast-changing environment (Kwok, 2008). Similar views were forwarded by a Pacific social work educator who responded to the above concern:

Conceptually and intellectually the global agenda offers a sound framework for thinking about social work education and practice. They simultaneously offer an inclusive framework for practice across many contexts while also enabling the emergence of differences across contexts. However, I 'wonder' about the extent to which they have relevance and/or currency for 'the field'. I have concerns that practitioners facing demands of the day-to-day workplace do not have the luxury of thinking about the shape and direction that the profession needs to take. . . Of the four pillars the goal concerning the promotion of the dignity and worth of people is the critical one. Without a focus on this fundamental aspect I do not think that the other pillars can be achieved.

While the above concerns are significant and, having been identified, we hope will receive concerted attention from relevant associations and leaders in the field of social work. We wish to draw into this article the growing inspiration from the region as expressed in statements by a number of current social workers and those who are currently undertaking social work education in their respective countries using ICT. Many of their feelings and statements are posted on the IFSW-hosted website (<http://voicesofsocialwork.org>). It is heartening to note that throughout the region and beyond there are many social work educators, practitioners and graduates who are able to either attribute their motivation to remain in social work, either to exceptional circumstances that prevail in their countries that compel them to act, or acknowledge their personal frameworks. We encourage the readers of this article to visit the IFSW website to hear the voices of social work which clearly suggest that many social work educators are directly or indirectly involved with the four pillars of the Agenda. These voices within the region are powerful and have the capacity to motivate others to take social work as a passionate career choice. We submit that the schools of social work and associations need to nurture and provide opportunities to shape these ideas into action.

Discussion: Common threads

Our aim in carrying out research for this article was not to compare the responses from social work educators from the region about the Global Agenda and its implementation. Instead, we were clearly interested in reflections as social work educators from this region with the process to highlight and hopefully explore and clarify some of the tenets of the Global Agenda that have been implemented since 2012.

Despite the diversity and fragmented nature of social work in Asia and the Pacific, the profession shows evidence for a robust and vibrant future as demonstrated by the enthusiasm and commitment from social work educators in this survey. The lack of research opportunities and yearning to capacitate themselves as social work educators within Asia needs to be understood from their specific cultural standpoints rather than contexts specific to their Western counterparts.

The responses from the educators presented earlier about the Global Agenda suggest room for positive and critical facilitative roles that may include twinning and assistance from the West and more developed schools of social work that have sensitive academics who respect native Asian cultures and have critical appreciation of social frameworks in Asia. The overall reticence in embracing global agendas is understandable in South Asia as they are grappling with local concerns that are either shaping or hindering formation of democratic ethos in their societies and in structural reforms including development of constitutional and legislative mechanisms to assist checking the malaise of corruption in these societies. Most schools of social work in South and South East Asia seem concerned about human rights and the covenants of human rights expressed in various international and United Nations documents and cover them in their teaching. However, it is left to individual social work students or the exceptional academic with sufficient motivation, passion or circumstances to pick up a rights issue and run with it. It is certainly not within the purview of this article to review what is taught as human rights, but it would suffice to say that the subject matters within human rights include both domestic and international issues and while international social work tends to focus on working in an international context. South Asian human rights education and input seems to be developing an appropriate thrust on critical awareness and consciousness in the areas of ethics, social justice, and macro-education within the practice context of people with disabilities, mental health and child protection and the areas of the frail aged. An opportunity exists for Western schools of social work to assist South Asian schools in holistic reflection based on their own teething troubles, struggles and development of the capacity and creation of human rights orientation both in Western social work practice and the ongoing struggles in their own backyards.

Participants in the survey reiterated various levels of difficulties with the dominant discourse of social work taking place in the English language. Certainly this is not the first time language has been identified as a common barrier in the region. A number of colleagues shared the difficulties in writing journal articles where it is clear that English is not the first language, this has been a challenge. Most comments they receive are that their article has not been written in UK or American English. Most articles that native Asian writers attempt are interesting, insightful and relevant but the educators have to struggle to meet the language standards of international journals. In a world increasingly dominated by electronic communication we seem to assume that all have equal access to this form of communication. This open critique of Asian social workers requires more sensitive handling both by international associations that sponsor journals and editorial collectives of significant publishing houses. Exciting, rich and diverse social work practice experience available within Asia can only enhance the Global Agenda and international social work discourse. Certainly the nature of local politics has significant implications for the ways in which welfare services are structured and resourced in the countries of this region. There is also the issue concerning the promotion and construction of the knowledge base and how one develops critical social work and reflective processes within these countries. There is growing interest in alternative paradigms of 'reverse missions' that instead of seeking to convert, move the focus to learning from indigenous leaders and visionaries – an approach akin to enhanced learning from local traditions through experiential interactions. As a strategy it is worth trying (Abram et al., 2005).

Social work educators in Asia, though facing diverse challenges, do possess professional skills and have the potential to assume leadership roles. They are increasingly taking responsibilities in building communities that can cope and contributing positively to the tasks of tackling poverty, injustices and inequities in their respective countries. Building coping and resilience skills has become the core business in the human services arena. A much-needed dimension of hope building needs to be considered (Pulla, 2010). Our findings raise a discourse about the relevance and usefulness of global principles and processes like the Global Agenda in strengthening social work and practices in the region.

We see neither a contradiction nor competition between advocating for further internationalization in social work education nor simultaneous development of contextual (indigenous) social work to meet both the local and regional needs and realities. We see that translating the four pillars of the Global Agenda on the ground is not automatic and needs the commitment of individual social work educators, schools of social work, regional organizations such as APASWE and international organizations like IASSW and IFSW and policy-makers. A process of dreaming together is not only desirable but possible. As authors of this article, we see the celebratory reason for coming together as the reason for being in social work and the voices from the Asia region show embryonic evidence that the Global Agenda is moving just in the right direction.

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