Ubuntu and its potential impact on the international social work profession

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Abstract
Ubuntu is the current theme for the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development and represents the highest level of global messaging within the social work profession for the years 2020–2030. This article presents an in-depth description of Ubuntu as a philosophy of social development that can strengthen social work theory and practice in its global aims of supporting community systems of social protection and social justice. The article concludes with advancing proposals on how the learnings from Ubuntu can strengthen international social work ethics, principles and practice.

Keywords
Philosophy, public policy, social change, social justice, social theory, social work

This article has been written to encourage discussion, reflection and action on the current Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development theme: Ubuntu (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2020). We hope that the international social work profession will gain deeper understanding of the Ubuntu concepts in self-led social development which we feel can be adapted and applied to all communities and cultural contexts throughout the world.

Ubuntu is the first theme of the new Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (The Agenda). The new Agenda commenced in 2020 and followed the first phase of the Agenda in the decade of 2010–2020. The previous decade highlighted themes that related directly with the globally agreed international principles of the social work profession. These were 'promoting social and economic equality', 'promoting the dignity and worth of peoples', 'promoting commu-

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nity and environmental sustainability' and in the last 2 years, 2018–2020, 'promoting the importance of human relationships' (IFSW, 2020).

Like the themes of the first 10 years of the Agenda, Ubuntu was selected to launch the second decade of the Agenda as it resonates with social work ideals, but further provides the global profession the opportunity to examine an Indigenous philosophy from the African region. You are invited to consider how this impacts on the norms of global social work that are mainly underpinned by Western philosophical values and thoughts.

The discussion presented here is largely based on the authors' sharing of information and learning from social work colleagues throughout the African region, the Indigenous social work representatives from across the globe and our own life experiences. One of us (Bernard Mayaka) was born, raised and practised in an Ubuntu Kenyan context, called Utu in Swahili. The other author (Rory Truell) has co-led the Agenda global process. He was mentored by Maori Indigenous elders over many years when co-leading an Indigenous university and social work education degree programme. He has continued to be mentored over the last 10 years by social work leaders throughout the African region and globally.

When we talk of Ubuntu, we note that there are many words from different African language groups that are used to describe Ubuntu. Internationally however, the term Ubuntu is the most well-known. It was popularised by Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu as a philosophy to guide the South African Truth and Reconciliation process following the end of apartheid (Tutu, 1999). Mugumbate and Chereni (2019) have described how the common concept of Ubuntu has historically spread across sub-Saharan Africa and how it is termed slightly differently throughout the different regional languages. In this writing, we are drawing on the central commonalities of Ubuntu philosophy from across the region. This is described by Mugumbate and Chereni (2020) as a collection of values and practices that Africans view as making people authentic human beings. While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing – 'an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental, and spiritual world'. In this article, we further highlight Ubuntu as a guide for structural change, enhancing sustainability and enriching life for all peoples.

We start with a global historical perspective which shows that Ubuntu was suppressed as a body of knowledge through colonisation processes. We then provide some examples of Ubuntu as a form of social protection, with special focus on child protection and community justice. We conclude by discussing how the global profession can learn from Ubuntu and adapt the central ideas into other social economic and cultural contexts.

Overview of Ubuntu

As social workers, we recognise all humanity as equal, and so too the philosophies that have developed across the world's regions. Each person, therefore, has the right to stand on their own cultural and philosophical terms with all others as equal citizens of the world. But this was not the predominant view of the Renaissance or Enlightenment phases of Western philosophical thought which remains today, underpinning global norms of power, control and the organisation of global relationships. It is in this philosophical tradition that we find current inequality has taken root (Stewart, 2012). Ubuntu and other African, Eastern and Indigenous philosophies were either not recognised or judged by Western societies, but actively suppressed (Nwosimiri, 2017). Immanuel Kant, who was one of the leading and most influential philosophers of the Enlightenment period, *concluded* through his scientific and philosophical analysis that African people were incapable of developing philosophy because of their inferiority to White people (McCormick, 2019). Hume and Hegel held

similar views (Nwosimiri, 2017). Such cultural-genocidal racist views are, therefore, now written into many of the baseline layers of Western thought which we as social workers are now obligated to challenge (IFSW, 2018; Staffen and Arshakyan, 2017). We further note that the suppression of African, Eastern and most Indigenous philosophies has resulted in the global presumption that recognises 'individual merit', rather than frameworks that use a holistic perspective, such as Ubuntu.

Ubuntu as a philosophy is based on generic life values of justice, responsibility, equality, collectiveness, relatedness, reciprocity, love, respect, helpfulness, community, caring, dependability, sharing, trust, integrity, unselfishness and social change. It emphasises that people's identities are continuously developing in the context of their reciprocal relationships with others, and thereby, through supporting and nurturing others, one's own identity and life quality are enhanced. Ubuntu focuses on the inclusivity of everyone within a community, their responsibility to others and to the wellbeing of the environment to ensure success for their own and future generations. Ubuntu is, therefore, timeless in the sense that the knowledge and practice have been passed from previous generations and apply to yet un-born generations; everything is connected. When an Ubuntu practising social worker is confronted with a problem, she does not seek to analyse it into components or parts, but rather she will ask in what larger context the problem resides. Individual identity and contributions are not denied but are seen as part of the whole. A successful individual is defined as someone that is committed to supporting others with integrity.

The concept of environmental justice is interwoven into Ubuntu practice as each person is regarded as being responsible for the reciprocal relationships they have with the environment around them. This stems from the traditional use of land and natural resources. Before the colonial ruling powers introduced the idea of ownership and title, everyone and every community had to take responsibility for communal land, water, forests and other natural resources. In Ubuntu, the custom is that each person and community will leave a place in a better condition than they found it. For instance, when the Nilotic peoples, who are pastoralists, moved to a region to graze their animal stock, they left it well cared and fertilised for the Bantu peoples to later utilise for farming.

Ubuntu differs from charity and humanitarian approaches which focus on alleviating the extremes of hardship after the event, rather than equipping people to transcend the conditions of hardship as a matter of course. As a living philosophy, new concepts and the identification of barriers and freedoms are constantly being evaluated. Ubuntu predicts that life faces ongoing challenges, disaster and loss, and that people need communal coping mechanisms to minimise damage. Ubuntu practitioners constantly engage people to work together to remove the social, psychological and structural barriers of inclusion for everyone's development, the emphasis of rights constantly being considered or reconsidered as social situations evolve and learn. Rights, however, are not understood as the central focus as they are in some Western contexts. In Ubuntu practice, the emphasis is on one's responsibility to ensuring the wellbeing of others. For example, Ubuntu imparts to us that we see our neighbour's child as our own, and their success is our success too.

This ancient wisdom and practice are relevant and critically important in today's contemporary world. Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013) highlight this for the social work profession when saying,

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

The Council of Social Workers in Zimbabwe also promotes the importance of Ubuntu in contemporary practice and obligates social workers across their nation to practise its values. Interest in synthesising Ubuntu values in social work practice is not limited to African countries. The International Federation of Social Workers received over 100 translations of the 2021 World Social Work Day poster from its member organisations with all words translated to local languages except Ubuntu. The Federation also received information of more than 300 social work events promoting Ubuntu from across the world (IFSW, 2021b). The wide embrace of Ubuntu by global social work clearly reflects the profession's interest in enriching its own principles with the Indigenous values centred on interconnection and reciprocity. The challenge that lies ahead is deepening the profession's understanding of Ubuntu and learning how its values can be adapted in non-Indigenous settings to strengthen or expand social work's existing principles. The next section of this article focuses on Ubuntu as it is applied in African contexts, particularly from Bernard Mayaka's lived experience. We then return to this challenge of how Ubuntu can impact non-Indigenous settings.

Ubuntu as a system of social protection

A number of United Nations agencies and many Western approaches to social services describe 'social protection' as a safety net to protect people from poverty, vulnerability and insecurity (UNICEF, 2021; United Nations, 2017; International Labor Organisation [ILO], 2017, 2018). These social protection systems facilitate targeted support to vulnerable individuals after a personal, health or social crisis has occurred. The practice involves finding a hardship-alleviating-solution after the damage is done (IFSW, 2016). In these typical Western approaches, little or no attempt is made to strengthen the family, community and societal foundations to prevent such social challenges. Likewise, there is little or no focus on preparing people or communities to overcome current and future challenges such as the legacy effects of poverty, climate change, colonisation and discriminatory laws, practices and customs that oppress or marginalise populations (ILO, 2018). In contrast, Ubuntu as it is advanced by social workers considers social protection as a living participatory platform in which the community itself is the primary form that provides care and advances development. Based on past traditional learnings, the progression of knowledge includes ongoing communal evaluation of current social concerns, risk analysis of future social crises and that all members of the communities are essential actors in the prevention of harm.

Such systems of care bestow each member of the community with the guardianship responsibility of ensuring that the welfare and wellbeing of all people are met. This is embedded in the informal education system and nurtured through the lifespan. Children learn from a young age of the following five main areas of human development: Mental, emotional, physical, social and spiritual. Their curiosity is encouraged through interacting with other community members. Initially, the child's parents are the main educators, then community members, whose roles differ at different times, take an active responsibility in supporting all children in their personal development in the five areas, alongside nurturing them to be active in fostering care for others. This foundation learning is supplemented with formal education in school. Children are considered an equal part of society, and places and spaces are made for them in all the activities including community decision making gatherings. As children grow in their responsibility, they also become key actors in the community social protection system.

As an example, I (Bernard Mayaka) can talk of a case scenario where, in my village in Kenya, we have a community social protection system known as 'chama' (a Swahili word for welfare group). Chama was naturally initiated by the community and for the community so that people could support each other especially during critical times of need. The chama welfare system is classified into two levels:

1. At the first level, all community members are involved, and all community members must participate. Often community gatherings take place around key life events, such as childbirth, marriages, death and mourning. These important life stages are significant to life and wellbeing where poverty is endemic as without social protections they may lead to individuals and families becoming vulnerable. In the chama gatherings, records are kept in a unique way. Only the monetary contributions of participants are written for accountability, while other forms of contribution by individuals – like attendance, cleaning, cooking – are recorded by memory, as future reciprocity is essential.

Everyone turns out to take part willingly as this is the community norm. An outsider may perceive that compliance comes from community expectations, but it is understood by all that these actions unify and strengthen our commitment to our relationships. This encourages inclusivity and reciprocity for solidarity. It is not done under pressure but through their ability to provide. Members are not socially equal, but treating each other humanely and with respect promotes peaceful coexistence which is the foundation for sustainable development (ILO, 2020). I note that the obligations that come from Ubuntu in supporting others and the environment have and are being obliterated by Western culture and philosophy. We too have cultivated selfish characteristics where one only cares for oneself and forgets the others and the environment. These challenges are also evident in social work. Much of the education offered in Africa teaches us Western models of case management and individual practice. We are taught to leave our life experiences out of the classroom and adopt Western 'modern' ways and apply eurocentric theories. After graduating, I found practice reality to be quite different. It took some time to reintegrate Ubuntu back into my practice, but once this occurred, I was equipped to stop the erosion of Indigenous community ideals and knowledge such as the ones with which I have grown up and know are effective. Case management and individualistic focused Western models have not succeeded here and nor can they in the absence of a robust welfare state.

2. The second level of community protection focuses on economic empowerment, development and the reduction of poverty. This is a community resource developed to invest in and strengthen economic and social futures. Individuals within the community come together with a sole purpose of offering social economic care, and support among its members. There is a coordination committee with the sole purpose of facilitation, communication and accountability, undertaken on a voluntarily basis. The committee is democratically elected. The system works on a 2-year cycle or as agreed by the subscribed members.

The leadership structure consists of a chairperson, vice-chair, treasurer and secretary. The meetings and decisions are made by the whole team. Facilitators are nominated dependent on their skills. Elections are held at the start of each cycle. There is an expectation to nurture new committee members, developing their skills, integrity, and transparency through encouraging learning by practice. Built into the cycle is a review structure coordinating accountability of the cycle by the whole team. They meet to discuss and vote on the report of the success, challenges and accountability before the tenure of the current cycle coordinators ends. If concerns or disputes are raised, this is handled and resolved there and then. For instance, if a member absconded within the cycle, he or she is fined, removed from the team or both depending on the case.

Community members contribute money and commit time (hours of labour) and other resources agreed with the whole team at the beginning of the cycle. Members visit and support each other as

scheduled on a rota. The visits are done every 2 weeks. So, it is more than a community bank, the peer support is a critical currency to community capacity building. It facilitates social protection and development of its members and community wellbeing at large. The topics discussed at the fortnightly meetings include financial contributions, farming, harvesting, business support and psychosocial support for all members. Every member has a mandatory contribution of Kenyan shillings (KShs) 100, this facilitates provision of a meal for the day for every meeting whether you attend or not. This ensures equity as well as facilitates reciprocity to all. Members discuss the challenges they have faced in the past 2 weeks, with the fortnightly host's issues being prioritised. The host can be helped by members in farming, ploughing, planting or even harvesting. Members distribute themselves to two main categories: One team goes to offer the labour requested, the second one goes to prepare the meal and supports the host. Once done, they all meet and share the meal while having social chats for fun, then finally, the financial contribution which is given to the host is collected and then offered with encouragement and advice. Individuals contribute freely anything from KShs 200 with no limit. This is meant to meet one's needs and it could be said to be a tax-free loan to the recipient, while the contributor is investing her or his savings. A record is kept by the treasurer as each member will be giving back to the next host the amount he or she contributed. Therefore, all members end up getting back their savings in full.

Most members have ended up managing to construct decent homes from this programme, improving their business, paying fees in time and socially interacting with a wider group, while also learning how to prepare diverse types of meals. It is a whole package promoting the wellbeing of all the members, thus enhancing community development. Members are still eligible to get loans if required and this is facilitated with the registration amount, only refundable at the end of a cycle. Furthermore, members are encouraged to invest by depositing with the team any amount possible which goes into a kitty used for lending at a minimal interest rate, thus gaining some interest at the end of the cycle.

This example from Mayaka's life demonstrates Ubuntu serving as a means and unit of social protection in itself. Community members working together, protecting each other from getting into poverty, while also promoting individual development. This approach is applied in different forms including in urban areas where people form a new community; irrespective of their cultural difference and social status, they still come together and live as a community caring and supporting each other at all times. This practice is seen in most African countries and by African communities living in other parts of the world. Whether living in homelands, or in cities or in immigrant communities, people are drawn together through Ubuntu to form local social protection.

Ubuntu and child protection

Child protection is the responsibility of the community, as noted by the well known African proverb: 'It takes a village to raise a child'. Care and protection in Ubuntu tradition are formed through communal ideals of human success, shared knowledge and intergenerational wisdom. These are often explained in the Indigenous terms to describe the individual stages of development celebrated in the rites of passage. They form a continuous renewing of support for the life cycle of the community, as shown in Table 1.

Age group rites of passage play a key role in helping children grow in their responsibility towards their community. For the age group 'rika' in Swahili, activities bring the whole community together to train, guide and advise teenagers on community values and their role on advancing the social and economic wellbeing of the community. During this period, the rite of passage training focuses on individuality, adult and familial responsibilities, community values as well as spirituality and environmental sustainability. This results in unifying the whole group

Table 1. Hatua za ukuaji (life stages).

Stages of development (in Gusii)	Age equivalence	Care responsibility	Roles played by
Ob'olito	Pregnancy	Family	Legacy of the ancestors and the community supporting the family
Koiborwa	Birth	Family and community	Community supports the family
Kegw'erere	Infancy	Family and community	Family supports the baby
Obwana	Childhood	Family and community	Community supports the child and the family
Goch'iburu	Transition to adulthood	Community and young people	Community training on new roles and responsibilities
Ob'osae	Young adult	Individual and community	Young adult supports the community
Enywomo/ Obogaka	Marriage/Adult	Individual and community	Mutual support
Ob'ogotu	Old age	Individual and community	Knowledge transfer to younger members of the community
Eg'ekweri/ Og'otimoka	Death	Individual and community	Legacy to the community and joining of the ancestors

and brings together all the individual perspectives through discussion and debate until a consensus is achieved.

Within this context and the absence of welfare states, social workers across Africa facilitate community child protection mutual support systems. This involves working with the community to mitigate potential risks to children. These mutual systems act to support families that are struggling, for example, to meet the basic needs of children because of poverty or neglect as a result of a death. The child protection mutual support systems typically respond without any view of punishing the parents; the emphasis is on strengthening the family's capacity to provide the best possible environment for the children.

In communities where Ubuntu practices have been eroded and high poverty levels exist, there is a very real danger that can come from outside the community where child traffickers try to buy children from their parents. Families in these situations are often faced with the dilemma of selling one child for a few dollars in order to pay for the life-saving medication for another. Social workers advocating and promoting child protection mutual support groups enable the communities to proactively prevent such devastating situations by planning cooperative Ubuntu action.

Ubuntu and social justice

> In the spirit of ubuntu, the central concern is not retribution or punishment but rather the healing of breaches, redressing of imbalances restoration of broken relationships, seek to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he has injured by his offence. (Tutu, 1999: 118)

Traditionally African culture did not have a prison system. Those who committed offences were required to act to restore the material damage, or loss or the hurt they had caused. This was

determined by the Chiefs and Elders in the community through a process of listening to all parties. In so doing, the offender and the person who had been wronged had the opportunity for their dignity to be restored. Through the process being carried out openly within the community, it enhanced integrity, trust and reduced the repetition of similar offences. This philosophical approach contrasts significantly with Western approaches and the use of imprisonment. Rates of recidivism show that imprisonment produces more crimes, violence and hurt in people's lives (Cullen et al., 2011).

Ubuntu as a foundation for social justice has been well documented by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (Tutu, 1999). We wanted to provide a further example of how this concept of social justice has been advanced into national policy in another African country, as each community applies these common principles in their own way. After the genocide in Rwanda, caused by colonial powers dividing and demonising tribes against one another, many international bodies and Western governments argued for the punishment of the perpetrators of violence. Applying the concept of Ubuntu, Rwanda said, 'No, we must get to the root cause that caused this violence' (Sarkin, 2001). They set up a gacaca court system that emphasised rehabilitation over punishment so that the perpetrators could reintegrate back into the community. Now Rwanda is seen worldwide as a leading nation in the African region (Human Rights Watch, 2011). It quickly brought a stop to violence and set a new integrated vision for all of its peoples based on the concepts of community decision-making, responsibility towards others and social justice (The Norwegian Helsinki Committee, 2002; Sambala et al., 2020).

Across the region, Ubuntu lore involves the communal approach where the perpetrators, victims and the whole local population take part in the legal system. The Ubuntu principle concentrates on deterrence, prevention, rehabilitation, restoration and reintegration. The aim is to facilitate healing and trauma by bringing forth the truth and working towards reconciliation.

Impact on the social work profession

'I grow-up with Ubuntu, but in my social work education the focus was on Western models of individualization, so my practice of Ubuntu as a social worker has been covert, and I thought not of interest to the profession.' This is a typical comment made by social workers across the African region. As the global Agenda theme of Ubuntu advances, we have heard many of our colleagues across the African region initially show a level of surprise. They have been quick to realise the problem,

> That is my experience of colonization and the more recent aid mentality from the rich countries who exported individual methods of working which are not appropriate to our cultures. Ubuntu needs to be something that is not only recognized around the world as a valid cultural perspective, but it needs to be understood as a valid contribution to our global knowledge.

This illustrates some of the challenges the social work profession faces, both in Africa and globally, and reveals the legacy of colonisation between Western and Africa universities and the global culture of the West knows best. As George Mansaray, from the Sierra Leone Association of Social Workers said, 'It is time to stop the legacy of importing Western models of social work that don't work here'. In his book with Ruth Stark, immediate past President of IFSW, it was further noted that not only do Western models that exclusively focus on the individual not work in Africa, but they also have significant limitations in the West (Mansaray et al., 2020).

Beyond recognition of the synergies and resonance of communal relationships underpinning humanity, the Ubuntu concepts are and will continue to challenge the modern global social work profession to question the Western philosophical bases on which it was largely built. This should

begin further enquiry into other philosophies from our colleagues' perspectives. This debate was begun by Indigenous social workers requesting space within the social work profession. The failures to gain recognition over the proceeding decades resulted in their own organisation of conferences and platforms where Indigenous social work could be more deeply explored and a process of sharing information could take place. It was not until 2004 at the World Conference in Adelaide, Australia that IFSW actively engaged with Indigenous social work movements and created space for their voice within the Federation. It was not until 2014 in an IFSW General Meeting that an Indigenous Committee was recognised and approved within the Federation. In 2020, the IFSW Indigenous Committee was upgraded to the highest level in the Federation with the formation of the IFSW Indigenous Commission. One of the tasks of this new Commission is to work with the profession to take action to address the Western concepts which have dominated since social work became an international profession.

The Global Statement of Ethical Principles is one example of a current policy that is often interpreted with a Western lens. This statement is used globally as the navigational system for all social work policy, teaching and practice. Its application is often applied to the individual rather than communities and the environment. Ubuntu as a Global Agenda theme now advances the opportunity for the profession to consider revision of the document to accommodate other global philosophies that extend our understanding of social work values.

Determination

IFSW has promoted the principle of 'Self-determination' as a long-standing value in social work, yet it can be interpreted differently in diverse cultural settings (IFSW, 2018). In a Western perspective, it may be interpreted as the individual's right to self-determination but in a context of indigeneity, it may be understood as the right of the nation to self-determine its future. Within the Agenda theme Ubuntu, a global paradigm shift is required to recognise the synergy of people's self-determining together.

We contend that during this time of the profession reflecting on Ubuntu concepts that terms such as 'Co and Self Determination' need to be advanced as a potential replacement for 'self-determination'. 'Co and Self' may more accurately define what we believe to be at the heart of the profession. Understanding the person in the context of their relationships with others, supporting the enhancement of those relationships to honour one another's combined journeys, will fulfil their joint aspirations.

Rights

Human rights are often understood in the context of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and, therefore, thought of as a tool in social work to emphasise each individual's right to a secure life. This concept is not necessarily problematic within Ubuntu but does not represent a full framework of understanding how rights are applied in the social context nor does a Western view of human rights emphasise the responsibilities of all community members to one another as a mechanism for realising each person's human rights.

This concept was first introduced to one of us (Rory Truell) in the late 1980s by Indigenous social workers from Aotearoa New Zealand who highlighted that the culture of rights without the balance of people taking responsibility for others can result in a culture of unfulfilled entitlement. In other words, at the daily living level of everyone, unless there is a common practice of responsibility to act to realise other's rights – no one's rights can exist.

Ubuntu is another Indigenous body of thought and practice which also recognises the responsibility of each human to act for the rights of all others. This is partly recognised by the profession in the International Definition of Social Work which included the word responsibilities alongside rights in the 2014 review, but we would suggest further global reflections on expanding the human rights description in the Statement of Ethical Principles to 'Holistic Rights and Responsibilities'. 'Holistic' further takes into consideration the social and environmental rights as well as individual and more clearly binding it with the concept of citizen 'responsibility' to care for others. We believe this speaks to what all social workers wish to see as an outcome of their involvement with people, families and communities: People acting to support one another's development.

Empowerment

The principle of 'Empowerment' has been a topic of discussion for many years as for some, the word empowerment could be understood as one person empowering another, such as a social worker gives power to a person using their services. This definition or understanding of the word 'empowerment' has been broadly rejected, for example, in the Second Report of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development which explicitly emphasises that one person cannot empower another, but people must lead their own development which can involve mutual support within families and communities and also from social workers (IASSW, ICSW, and IFSW, 2016). To expand more fully the learnings from Ubuntu and other Indigenous bodies of thought, a way of advancing this understanding could be to talk of 'Mutual Empowerment' or 'Combined and Self Empowerment'. This description may more actuarially reflect the multidirectional relationships which are required that enable people to move from feeling powerless to having influence in their lives.

Social justice

Likewise, social justice as a social work principle can be considered in the light of Ubuntu. The stressing of 'we' and conciliation is fundamental in the traditional African context rather than the Western notion that can emphasise 'us and them' as well as punishment for wrongdoing. Ubuntu causes us to consider processes that do not polarise but create opportunities to bring divided parties together to ensure all voices can be safely heard in the context of healing and seeking resolution and restoration of dignity and wellbeing. No system is perfect, but the Ubuntu approach creates the opportunity for reflection in many situations in social work practice. We can ask, does the imprisonment of an offender cause the person who has suffered loss or indignity to feel that she or he has achieved a sense of social justice? In our experience, we often find the answer to be no. Indigenous models of restorative justice (Tutu, 1999) however have enabled an injustice to be translated into repairing the dignity and humanity of all involved.

Finding expanded meaning of the social work profession's principles and focusing on their integration is critically important. The framework of principles acts as the navigational stars for policy development, educational curriculum and practice guidelines. These examples of ways to redescribe the profession's principles are not advanced as the final wording submissions. They are our reflections on how the existing principles can be expanded and reconsidered in the light of Ubuntu, as a way of strengthening the profession's impact when working with people in co-producing social development.

Definition of social work

The International Definition of Social Work (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW] and International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], 2014) can also be reflected upon more deeply in the light of Ubuntu and Indigenous social work perspectives. As one of us, Truell, co-chaired the last two years of the Definition review process (2012 to 2014), we are aware of the intense global discussions that contributed to the final version that was adopted by IFSW and IASSW in 2014.

The revised Definition articulated four main differences from the previous iterations. These were recognising 'social work as an academic discipline' alongside practice, the recognition that social work has its own theories, the addition of 'collective responsibility' as a principle sitting alongside human rights and the identification of 'indigenous knowledge' as an equal body of thought.

Each of these additions marked the developments in the social work profession. The new Definition illustrated a more inclusive and expanded identity of social work. The first two additions highlighted changes in social work education as the profession was now regarded as an independent discipline with its own unique body of knowledge. The latter two which highlighted responsibility and Indigenous wisdom reflected the significant growth of the profession and the inclusion of more voices from Africa, Asia-Pacific and Latin America. This last point is perhaps, to the Western trained social worker, more confusing as it challenges decades of social work education and training to encompass wider concepts of practice.

The 2014 Definition marked a new milestone of the profession in highlighting and contrasting indigeneity equally alongside Western frameworks. It advances the knowledge of cultures where people act in reciprocity with others. As a different professional concept, this has now led to the theme Ubuntu as a major theme in the Global Agenda. It provides an invitation for Western national associations of social work to enhance their social work practice by discovering the strength of Indigenous approaches. This should involve working alongside local Indigenous social workers and their communities and embarking on new ways of learning. This process has begun in a handful of countries and since the launch of the global theme Ubuntu, is expanding.

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), for example, has issued an apology for the role the social work profession in being complicit with the widespread abuse and harm of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and developed a partnership-based action plan that will decolonise the profession (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2004). The Canadian Association of Social Workers has also issued an apology for the profession's role in contributing to the injustices imposed on Indigenous peoples and is now working with First Nations peoples towards reconciliation (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2019). Such apologies and the building of partnerships for reconciliation are starting points consistent with the Ubuntu principles of conflict resolution. But the learning of Ubuntu's relevance to enhancing Western approaches is also occurring between national associations of social work where there is no direct connection between past coloniser and colonised peoples. For example, the Swiss National Association of Social Workers has formed a partnership with the Sierra Leone Association of Social Workers 'in the spirit of Ubuntu' and 'shared-learning' for the benefit of social work in both countries. This partnership has been subsequently promoted by IFSW as an inspirational example for other associations to learn from (IFSW, 2021a). Interactions of this nature, we believe, are likely to produce more focus on adapting Indigenous values into Western contexts of practice.

There is a need in our global learning to acknowledge the significant experience of Indigenous social workers who have worked to change services or build new approaches where imported Western models have failed their communities. They have addressed the structural barriers that

have caused marginalisation of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, it needs to be stated that we are not promoting that Ubuntu as practised in the above examples should simply replace Western or individualised approaches to social work. Understanding, recognising, preserving and building on each locally defined culture is critical to successful social work. In the profession's constant stream of development, the theme Ubuntu gives us all the opportunity to expand our understanding of each of the words contained in the Definition, including 'Indigenous knowledge' and 'Responsibility'. Ubuntu can help us consider how past and current recognised cultural interdependencies can promote further partnership within communities as their own primary essential social protection systems, that with assistance from state services, form the basis of their journeys of transformation.

Conclusion

The Global Agenda theme Ubuntu highlights a philosophy that is different to the way social work and social services are constructed in many countries. The understanding that communities themselves are a form of social protection is often overlooked in social services design and thereby services unintentionally erode the natural organic systems that support people. Under Ubuntu informed practice, social workers recognise these community systems and seek to enhance them, thereby, promoting opportunities to build more control over their lives as well as harmonious relationships.

Some readers may experience our description of Ubuntu as so far removed from their own culture and settings that they see little relevance of its application in their work. Should this be the case, we would like to suggest to these valued readers to look closely at the communities where you work or reside and try to assess the organic systems of care that exist. Perhaps, also consider how the social services support or undermine those natural systems. Regardless of culture, nationality or setting, we believe the learnings from Ubuntu can have meaning, especially in social work practice and in every culture. Naturally, as all cultures differ in some respects, the way people show or express care can also be different. But in general, local social workers will always know of the cultural strengths and barriers to the expression of care within families and communities and have a strong sense of how to unlock people's potential to act on the wellbeing of others.

'Working with people, strengthening families and communities, fostering interconnectedness and care and promoting responsibility to others' are words we believe should be written into every social work job description. We think many of you will agree and we hope that Ubuntu gives you more opportunities for reflecting on how to expand your own practice for a sustainable development.

Ubuntu is philosophy and practice that resonates with many cultures around the world and is consistent with the values of social work. Ubuntu further can expand our understanding of the profession's principles, focusing them on human relationships, making them more holistic, not just to the individual but also to what every individual needs: A community that cares for them. Ubuntu is one of the many Indigenous approaches that shows us the way.

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