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The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development: A Conflicted Global Concept?

David N. Jones 

This paper reflects on the impact of The Global Agenda (GA) process and focuses on its relevance for social work practitioners and educators in the United Kingdom (UK). It asks, is there a global social work profession? The paper explores three key elements. Firstly, to what extent is it possible to view the diversity of social work under the differing national frameworks, as a coherent, single professional identity? Secondly, to what extent are national concepts of social work related to global instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thirdly, are there universal theoretical models? Having explored these questions, The GA process unequivocally adopted the position that there is a global social work profession, that its members and practitioners do share core values, principles and practice models, that these models require constant review and revision, and that one purpose of the process was/is to stimulate those discussions and explore those narratives, as is evident in the four GA reports. This makes The GA process as relevant for practice and policy in the UK, as it is for other countries.

Keywords: global agenda; international social work; sustainable development goals; values; ethics; social work practice

Introduction

This paper reflects on the impact of The Global Agenda (GA) process and focuses on its relevance for social work practitioners and educators in the United Kingdom (UK). It asks, is there a global social work profession (Gray and Webb 2008)? The GA was developed and promoted by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) following global consultations.

In responding to this question, we must take account of several elements, first is the extent to which it is possible to view the diversity of social work, as practiced under the differing national frameworks, as a coherent, single professional identity. Social work has a diversity of employers, usually including the nation state governments and local governments alongside non-governmental and private sector bodies; government social work is usually structured around state laws and agency structures, which can vary widely.

There is also a growing awareness that the description of social work practice in government and agency guidelines can be at variance with the reality of practice, especially in contexts where foreign (usually western) literature and concepts are explicit in education and guidelines, but where social workers apply local and indigenous knowledges in their daily work (e.g. Gray, Coates, and Bird 2010; Gray and Webb 2008; Ibrahima and Mattaini 2019; Mayaka and Truell 2021; Chigangaidze et al. 2023; Mayaka, Uwihangana, and van Breda 2023). The same issue can arise in western settings, such as the UK, where local practice may deviate from the centralised, managerialist approach formally adopted in such countries.

A second and related question concerns the policy context for social work practice; to what extent are national concepts of social work related to global instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations 2015). Formal policies in many western countries focus on problems from an individualistic or family perspective, which appear to have no direct relationship to global instruments such as the SDGs, whereas much of the rest of the world sees individual problems in a social and community context, therefore having a clearer link to the SDGs. In much of the world, social work is structured as an agent of community and social development, whereas UK policy tends to be focused on individual pathology and risk management. The function of social work tends to be conceived differently depending on the national policy model. This apparent divergence is arguably countered by the universal theoretical models which underpin social work practice, seeking to conceptualise human behaviour and linking individual and collective motivation.

This gives rise to a third issue, however, namely are there universal theoretical models? Frameworks for understanding and describing behaviours are constantly evolving in response to research, experience, and emerging understandings. For example, the extent to which these 'universal models' are conceptualised around western cultural traditions and thought is being re-evaluated, with some arguing that they are embedded in historical and current forms of oppression and colonialism. Theorists and researchers are increasingly exploring indigenous and traditional frameworks such as the African concept of a collective reality expressed as 'ubuntu' (Mayaka, Uwihangana, and van Breda 2023) and the South American concept of 'buen vivir' (Chassagne 2018). Thus they are defining social work as including a

concern for the natural environment and the climate emergency (Rambaree, Powers, and Smith 2022). These elements are reflected in The GA but are rarely explicit in UK social work policy and practice. Some argue that The GA process highlights the need for UK policy on social work to broaden its approach and align itself more explicitly with global discourses.

Having explored these questions as necessary elements for continued exploration and debate, The GA process unequivocally adopted the position that there is a global social work profession, that its members and practitioners do share core values, principles and practice models, that these models require constant review and revision and that one purpose of the process was/is to stimulate those discussions and explore those narratives, as is evident in the four GA reports (IASSW, ICSW, IFSW 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020). This makes The GA process as relevant for practice and policy in the UK, as it is for other countries.

Shaping the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development 2000-2020

The Global Agenda process grew out of discussions between the three global bodies after 2000 (Jones and Truell 2012; Truell, Jones, and Lima Fernandez 2017; Truell and Jones 2017; Tassé 2016, 2014; Lombard 2015; Correll 2011; Hadorn 2012; Lyons and Huegler 2013; Truell and Jones 2015). The organisations recognised a need to provide stronger global leadership for the social work profession and to emphasise the link between social work and social development. A strong and unified partnership between the three global bodies was also seen as essential to developing the strength and credibility of the profession. A plan to develop a common policy platform as a basis for global advocacy was central to the strategy, incorporating joint conferences from 2010 and linked themes for World Social Work Days (WSWDs). A network of regional observatories was also to be launched, together forming a global observatory on social work and social development. This inspired local and regional activity and stimulated grassroots engagement, as had been hoped. Whilst the themes were established in 2010, it was recognised that an iterative process would ensure a dynamic approach as grassroots consultation continued and the organisations responded to global events.

The vision for The Global Agenda throughout has been to:

- Increase our visibility
- Increase our influence
- Strengthen and promote social work and social development
- Increase social worker self-confidence
- Challenge established ways of thinking
- Support national associations, member bodies, networks and regions
- Strengthen the global bodies.

The 2010 world conference in Hong Kong (Jones, Yuen, and Rollet 2008; Sha 2010) was the first fully integrated, joint conference organised by the three global bodies, the result of several years of negotiation and planning. The conference culminated in the identification of four pillars for an agenda for social work and social development, which were endorsed in the final plenary by acclamation (International Association of Schools of Social Work, International Council on Social Welfare, and International Federation of Social Workers 2010). These were subject to further global consultation and refinement, concluding with the following pillars:

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

Each theme provided a two-year focus for global advocacy from 2012-2020 and will be familiar to all who have participated in the WSWDs over the last decade. The Global Agenda has since been refreshed for the second decade (2020-2030) (Campanini 2020; Truell 2020).

The challenge of creating a 'global agenda' which could unite social workers in all parts of the world is not to be under-estimated. Some have argued that the very process is illegitimate (e.g. Gray 2005; Gray & Webb 2014). Social work is perhaps more strongly 'national' than most if not all the other professions as the practice of social work is strongly shaped by national policy and frequently by legislation. National priorities differ and there are widely differing social and economic contexts which also shape the practice and management of social work. Defining the common characteristics of social work in all contexts is seen by some as a challenge - although this diversity is shared by some other professions. Values and ethics are frequently cited as distinguishing characteristics, but they do not lend themselves easily to an agenda for action which unites practitioners, managers, and academics.

Whilst seeking to providing a unifying agenda for the profession, the process also had to acknowledge the historical domination of western concepts and practices. Examination of the significance of decolonisation for social work was emerging at that time (e.g. Mignolo 2009; Gray, Coates, and Bird 2008; Gray et al. 2013), and influenced the shaping of ideas and the narrative which provided the foundation for the four pillars. The pillars which emerged from the consultation had clear links with values and ethics, but also provided connecting narratives to elements of practice. The working papers produced in advance of the 2010 conference included reference to the needs of specific client groups and to the principle of partnership with service users. The pressures to opt for a client group agenda were strong and, in many ways, familiar and attractive. On the other hand, such an approach could have resulted in a long list of groups with 'needs' which would often have been seen as country-specific and not universal.

An evaluation commissioned by the three bodies concluded that The GA was seen by all as having shaped the activities of the three global organisations and had an overwhelmingly positive impact on the worldwide position of social work and social development (Jones 2020). The commitments identified in 2012 had largely been delivered. The link with WSWDs had drawn in thousands of social workers and students around the world and focused consistent attention on the four pillars. The themes had shaped global, regional, and local research, conferences and activities and had resulted in citations in over one hundred and fifty academic papers - and continues to do so.

Creating, sustaining, and developing The GA process was an astonishing achievement which reflects positively on the three organisations and the determination of the social work profession to have a global impact. The determination to develop The GA for the second decade was further enhanced in 2022 with the first Global People's Summit, co-driven by IFSW and the United Nation's Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD). This expanded the partnership to include 23 partner organisations, including several UN agencies and global organisations. It resulted in The People's Charter for an Eco-Social World (People's Global Summit 2022).

Why the Global Agenda for Social Work is Relevant to UK Social Work?

Most social work practice in the UK and other western countries tends to be domestic and micro - practice is concerned with individuals, families, and local communities. For example, the focus of government policy and professional discussion is on child protection, safeguarding adults and hospital discharges, although the balance of the approach takes different forms in the four countries of the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). But it is equally true that local problems are increasingly shaped by international trends and developments, such as climate change, mass migrations, international conflicts like Ukraine and pandemics. The social policy which shapes local social work practice must therefore take full account of the international context. That applies especially in the UK, which has one of the most diverse and globally connected populations of any country, a fact frequently ignored in domestic government pronouncements and policy guidance on social work. That global context is also calling into question public spending commitments and the type of social policy which has been followed in the UK. There seems little doubt that future support for many will have to be delivered in new and different ways, including more community focused approaches. The UK has much to learn from other countries, perhaps especially countries in the global south, as we navigate social crises. The Global Agenda helps shape that policy debate.

The UK has one of the most internationally diverse workforces in social work and social services. It is a matter of UK policy to recruit heavily from overseas

to compensate for the failure to train sufficient professionals and carers from the UK population (Department of Health and Social Care 2022; Lepper 2023). This carries moral responsibilities for the UK to the sending countries, who are being deprived of professional assets, as well as to professionals coming to the UK, who sadly frequently report negative experiences (BASW Diaspora Social Work Special Interest Group 2023; Priya 2021).

For the UK population and therefore for social work practice, the local is frequently international and the global is local. All social workers need a global awareness to understand individual problems and needs, whether in terms of cultural differences, language issues or family networks (National Association of Social Workers 2015; Melendres 2022; Laird and Tedam 2019). A mature profession is globally aware and connected, open to learning from, and sharing policy and practice around the world. There are explicit examples of UK social work taking ideas from others, such as family group conferences from New Zealand (Burns and Fruchtel 2012) or child sexual abuse models from Scandinavia (Landberg and Svedin 2013). At the very personal level, social workers always need to be conscious of the possibility that the best solution in a family situation may well involve family members in other countries (Children & Families Across Borders 2020). This can be especially important for some young people who are looked after but can apply equally to adults.

The international interconnectedness of UK social work and social services - and indeed also of the health service - highlights the absolute importance of building global policy and professional connections. That is why the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) and many universities have put such emphasis on building and sustaining international connections, especially but not exclusively, through IFSW and IASSW. The Global Agenda provides a global reference point for those relationships. It has stood the test of time and remains open to development and refinement as circumstances change.

Fundamentally, people are people, whatever their nationality, culture, or background. The unifying power of global human rights declarations and institutions, including the professional bodies, are needed more than ever, as some politicians try to foment division and conflict and to divide people in the face of the global economic, social, and environmental forces, facilitated by the negative impacts of the media and social media. Professional bodies need to strengthen their commitment to honest communication and global humanity in our shared space on this planet. The Global Agenda and The People's Charter (The People's Summit 2022) contribute to that objective, co-building the new eco-social contract to protect the people and the planet. As individual social workers, in turn we need to remain alert to international elements in our work and practice as global citizens.

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