

FOREWORD

HUMAN RIGHTS AND SOCIAL WORK

PRÓLOGO

DERECHOS HUMANOS Y TRABAJO SOCIAL

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I would like to thank the editors for including in the e-journal on Global Social Work my thoughts and reflections on Social Work and Human Rights, presented at the 2nd International Congress on Social Work (Spain, April 2016). This electronic publication is a most appropriate way for nurturing dialogue and sharing knowledge and practice about this important question. I also wish to commend the *UNESCO Chair in Democratic Citizenship and Cultural Freedom* at the University of La Rioja for its role in the organization of the Congress.

In my opinion the issue at the core of our topic is not whether human rights are relevant for or connected to social work. The close relationship between these two concepts has been common ground already for several years among scholars, practitioners and international organizations. To quote Reichert, a well-known scholar from the social work discipline, “[The] link between the social work profession and human rights appears natural. Specific goals of the profession aim to help others obtain needed information, services, and resources to fulfil their needs” (Reichert, 2001, p. 43).

This natural convergence was also recognized by the United Nations. The predecessor to the current Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) published as early as 1992 a training manual (republished in 1994) on “Human Rights and Social Work. A manual for Schools of Social Work and the Social Work Profession” (United Nations, 1994). There, the connection between social work and human rights is strongly underlined. Social work is perceived as a way of meeting and responding to human needs.

So, the key challenge is to operationalize a paradigm shift from a needs- to a rights-based conceptualization of social work; to move away from interventions driven by charity and the choice of helping the other out of personal conviction or religious beliefs towards responses that are dictated by the imperative of basic justice, anchored in a system of rights and corresponding obligations established by international law (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2006)

In that respect, I see three enabling factors.

First of all, the operational underpinning of social work in human rights is promoted by the impetus created by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This is a transformative Agenda of human rights marked by the unprecedented commitment of “leaving no-one behind” and addressing all forms of discrimination, targeting social justice outcomes. The vision of the Agenda states:

We envisage a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination; of respect for race, ethnicity and cultural diversity; and of equal opportunity permitting the full realization of human potential and contributing to shared prosperity (United Nations, 2015, -Our vision, 8-p. 4).

I would also underscore the attention to the issue brought about by the momentous 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, commemorated throughout the year 2018.

A second factor relates to inherent elements of the social work discipline, which resonates with the logic of human rights principles and standards and also with that of the 2030 Agenda. Social work, in the evolution of its conceptual basis now promotes a critical and holistic approach to understanding and responding to social problems. It recognizes the complexity of challenges faced and seeks to comprehend root causes and interconnections. The SDGs are underpinned by a similar logic. They “bring an interconnected understanding of human needs and concerns that are economic, social and environmental” (Jayasooria, 2016, p. 19-20).

An integral part of this approach is the attempt of the social worker to keep in perspective, whether dealing with a disadvantaged/marginalized group or individual, the implications and impact deriving from broader national, regional or international environments and contexts (Reichert, 2003, p. 77).

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, the application of a human rights-based approach already enjoys the full support of the community of practitioners itself.

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) defined in 2014 the profession of social work in the following way:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work (IFSW, 2014, paragraph 1).

Furthermore, the community of practitioners has already articulated this commitment; it was captured in the *Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development* presented by the IFSW, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) during the preparatory process for Agenda 2030. In particular, it stated that: “We will strive with others for a people-focused global economy that is regulated to protect and promote social justice, human rights and sustainable development” (IFSW, IASSW & ICSW, 2012, p. 2, paragraph 7).

A similar understanding was already emerging at the national level in some cases, e.g. the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) of the United States stipulates the following:

Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, colour, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, or mental or physical disability (NASW, 2017, p. 30, d)).

Two additional features of the above statements deserve to be highlighted here: first, the transformative character of social work. Social work is not simply the provision of services that results in improving the lives of targeted human beings who find themselves in difficult situations. It is about empowerment that enables people to get a hold of their lives. It is about changing the rules of the game and thereby changing the context that perpetuates social problems.

The second point relates to the call for an active role and responsibility of social workers in promoting human rights and preventing discrimination, racism and exclusion. This underscores the critical mandate of all UN organizations in the context of the body of international norms and standards, e.g. International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). The task is to close two gaps: one between the international standard and national legislation, and the other, between national law and practice.

These three factors create a dynamic that facilitates the integration of a human rights-based approach in the context of social work.

What needs to be done in practical terms, however, in order for this commitment to be systematically applied? A key priority is education –as it was recognized during 2nd International Congress on Social Work–.

The value of investing in promoting knowledge of human rights in social work education is evident in the important number of research that has been conducted over the years. It is also evident in the progressive emergence of specific degree programmes focused precisely on social work and human rights.¹

At the same time, we recognize some important challenges in this context. Social work as an interdisciplinary field draws from diverse areas including psychology, sociology, politics, criminology, economics, ecology, education health, counselling, etc. Clearly designing an adequate multi-disciplinary curriculum that takes on board this range of domains is a very complex undertaking. Additional constraints derive from insufficiently developed areas of human rights law, whether in terms of normative clarity or in terms of the collection, analysis and codification of extensive practical experience. Examples of such areas are the operationalization of the participation and accountability principles, respect for cultural diversity and the interrelated right to take part in cultural life. This aside, of course, from the complexities of interpretation – here I would like to refer to a recent debate at UNESCO on the culture of respect as antidote to religious intolerance and stigmatization. An interesting distinction was made. At the level of State action, this concept must always be linked to the upholding of human rights and fundamental freedoms to protect against unjustified limitations of the right to freedom of expression and particularly of religion-related expression, while at the realm of individual ethical choice there is much room for proactively promoting peace and understanding.

The complexity of the social work discipline and the gap in the documentation of practical experiences leads to the second priority - the strengthening of the evidence base. This body of knowledge of social work experiences where human rights are considered a basis for intervention needs to be elaborated, codified and disseminated, enabling the articulation of common challenges, patterns and lessons learned for broader applicability. An important initiative in this regard involves one of our hosts, namely the UNESCO Chair at the La Rioja University. The Chair promotes a research programme in the Maghreb region, aimed at fostering a human rights-based approach in higher education, including in the field of social work, which concluded in 2017 with the proposal for a fully-fledged masters' degree.

In a similar vein, enriching findings for the stronger articulation of peace and social work have come out of a research publication officially launched in May 2018 in Geneva, in the Library of the United Nations. The book entitled *Long Walk of Peace: Towards a Culture of Prevention*,² result of a partnership between UNESCO and the Abat Oliba CEU University (Barcelona, Spain), analyses the value of peace as the first pillar of the United Nations' work and one of the main objectives of UNESCO. Against the backdrop of Agenda 2030, and particularly SDG 16, it highlights the perspectives of 32 UN entities on the challenges of peacebuilding, and explores how they have perceived and contributed to the peace agenda within their own areas of competence. UNESCO believes that the current reconfiguration of the UN peace agenda provides an opportunity for all UN entities to evaluate their work within a larger framework of peacebuilding and conflict prevention and seeks – through this peace study – to contribute to the ongoing global reflection.

These two priorities converge operationally with several UNESCO priorities. Let me share four examples that could be representative in demonstrating the opportunities for mutual learning:

The first pertains to education. Within the framework of the SDG 4 on *Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education*, UNESCO is promoting (under target 4.7) the acquisition of knowledge and skills to foster a culture of human rights and cultural diversity. In this context, after unpacking the concept of global citizenship education (GCED), UNESCO is investing in developing tools to support implementation in formal, non-formal and informal learning. One example from the informal setting is a contextualized youth manual on citizenship and human rights education already made available in Tunisia, Morocco and Mauritania and in the pipeline for the other Maghreb countries³. An integral effort is to tackle violent extremism; UNESCO sees the prevention of such phenomena as an explicit objective of education.

A second area is intercultural dialogue, where within the framework of UNESCO's leadership of the UN International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures (2013-2022), we are working to develop tools to support the acquisition of the core competences needed for individuals to appreciate and exchange effectively across cultural differences. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the creation of more resilient societies, able to create and sustain peace as the foundation of inclusive and sustainable development. Having worked with leading experts to produce a seminal conceptual and operational framework on intercultural competences in 2013, UNESCO is now developing practical activities to translate this knowledge into actionable activities to build these intercultural competences among diverse

audiences. One such product is our *Manual on Intercultural Competences based on Human Rights*, which offers an innovative, adaptable and accessible methodology to develop these skills among different target groups, and focusing on different issues. The manual has to date been piloted in Bangkok (Thailand), Harare (Zimbabwe) and San Jose (Costa Rica), where local stakeholders (including government officials, UN staff, educators and civil society leaders) have been trained to facilitate the activity, before delivering it with diverse participant groups including vulnerable women, marginalised youth and indigenous groups. The evaluation of pilots undertaken so far have shown that all of the participants involved believe that the activity had given them the skills to respect other people more, and over 70% of the participants have said they are now curious to discover more about the cultures of others. Furthermore, the locally trained facilitators have already gone on to scale the use of the activity, for example rolling it out as part of efforts to overcome intergenerational misunderstandings in the democratic process in Zimbabwe, and as part of the consultation process with indigenous populations in Costa Rica.

A third area relates to the Management of Social Transformations (MOST) programme. The purpose of this Programme is to contribute to more inclusive and sustainable development outcomes by promoting participatory and evidence-based policy-making. To achieve this goal, we focus primarily on reinforcing mechanisms and capacities - amongst science communities, policy makers and practitioners - for a stronger research-policy interface at all levels. Examples of work by MOST include a forum to address the inclusion of refugees in the sub-region of Central Africa and one on ageing in Asia-Pacific in 2017. We also worked in 2016-2017 on addressing the issue of inclusion from the angle of youth policy in Cuba (MOST School on “Methodologies for inclusive youth policies: participatory research, knowledge brokering and anticipatory systems”). Finally, we partnered with the *Union nationale des acteurs de formation et de recherche en intervention sociale* (UNAFORIS) and the European Association of Schools of Social Work (EASSW) in relation to the conference under the title *Social work education in Europe: challenging boundaries, promoting a sustainable future* that was held in Paris in June 2017.

Fourth, we work closely with the International Coalition of Cities against Racism – ICCAR, a platform of more than 500 member cities across the world structured around regional and national coalitions. In this context, UNESCO supports city authorities to implement commitments that cover a broad array of interventions, from monitoring racist incidents to access to housing and employment, as well as to tolerance education and promotion of

cultural diversity. A centrepiece of our strategy is the collation of promising practices and success stories at the local level. Highlights of ongoing efforts are the evolving Toolkit for Equality elaborated by European Training and Research Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Graz – ETC-Graz, covering at this stage some 10 model-policies to tackle discrimination, built on the basis of lessons learned from municipal practice in cities across the region).⁴ Another example is the ongoing partnership with the European Coalition – ECCAR and M. V. Vardinoyannis Foundation, which has developed from a charitable funding initiative to an institutional aim to empower city authorities to promote the inclusion of refugees and migrants.⁵

I hope that the dialogue initiated at the occasion of the Congress will be pursued with the view to achieving a convergence between those and other programme areas with initiatives in the sphere of social work and more importantly explore possible synergies and joint action.

The operationalization of a human rights-based approach has been on the agenda of the United Nations system for many years. Although important advances have been made, much ground remains to be covered. A better understanding of experiences and collective wisdom is a key to finding practical responses to the challenge of implementing Agenda 2030. I am certain that we can learn from each other in order to meet our common goal, that of building a world where no one is left behind.

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NOTES

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² The book is accessible at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0026/002628/262885e.pdf>.

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- ³ *Manuel d'apprentissage de la démocratie en Tunisie*, available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002152/215297F.pdf>; *Education à la citoyenneté et aux droits de l'homme - Manuel pour les jeunes au Maroc*, available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002344/234423f.pdf>; *Education à la citoyenneté et aux droits de l'homme – Manuel pour les jeunes en Mauritanie*, available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002344/234424f.pdf>.
- ⁴ The text of the Toolkit is available at: <http://www.eccar.info/en/eccar-toolkit-equality>.
- ⁵ The study *Cities Welcoming Refugees and Migrants* issued within the framework of this partnership is available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002465/246558e.pdf>