



1. International social work

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Keyword

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Introduction

Interest in international social work has expanded greatly in recent decades, especially in the more industrialized countries which have experienced the challenges of globalization. This interest is observed by the growth in publications on the topic; the increased focus in training of an international dimension; the increased exchange of teachers and students in the international arena; as well as increased international research. The main contribution to these academic discussions is dominated by scholars of Western countries, especially United Kingdom (Uk) and United States (Usa).

If we look at the history, we can state that this dimension has been present in social work from the beginning. International collaboration has been fundamental to the growth of social work as a profession in different countries. Extensive international contacts between the profession's founders in the late nineteenth century enabled innovations

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such as charity visitors and settlement work to be spread from the United Kingdom to the United States.

The first evidence of specific attention to the international dimension in social work can be found in the first conference held in Paris in 1928. René Sand, a Belgian doctor, deeply convinced of the interconnection of different factors (economic, social and health) to promote true social development, identified the importance of professionalization of the philanthropic sector and of international exchanges. Following participation in a national conference of social work in the Usa, he promoted the international meeting in Paris, in which 2,421 representatives people coming from 42 nations participated (Bortoli, 2006). A significant part of the discussion was focused on education, which led to the creation of the International committee of schools of social work – later on called International association of schools of social work (Iassw). Its first meeting was in Berlin in 1929 under the presidency of Alice Salomon. As a consequence of the Paris international conference, two other international organisations were constituted: the International council of social welfare (Icsw) (representing welfare organisations) and the International federation of social workers (Ifsw), previously called International permanent secretariat of social workers (Ipsw) (representing social workers).

The purpose of this emerging process of international cooperation of social work and social work education was the creation of a documentation centre for social work education that collected and catalogued materials from over 100 schools of social work. As a result of this first international survey on social work education, commonalities and differences in the curricula were identified. This highlighted the importance of adapting the programs to respond to the variety of social needs, different cultural backgrounds, different political, historical conditions and educational systems in each country. Eglantyne Jebb, emphasizing the increased international involvement of social work, after the first world war, encouraged participants to engage in international research, underlining that «the international social work requires constant contact between social workers, based on an international intellectual foundation» (Jebb, 1929: 651). The early years of the 20th century saw many activities being organized in different sectors such as international conferences, formative exchanges and summer courses. How-



ever, it is only after the Second World War that a stronger international exchange period began, along with the dissemination of American social work theoretical developments and their adoption in Europe and in many other countries. Since then International organizations (Iassw, Ifsw) have developed a common international definition of social work, promoted standards for training and guidelines on ethics. Together with the Icsw they remain engaged in a global agenda of social commitments for the future.

1. The international social work definition

Although social work recognises specific cultural and contextual dimensions such as historical backgrounds, social policy trends, pedagogical and disciplinary relationships and «politics», all of which have implications for the establishment of social work training in different countries and the specific ways in which the social work professional role is interpreted. Despite this local orientation, there is both international relevance and commonalities in diverse examples of practice across many countries of the world.

There have been a range of attempts to define social work and the social worker, since the first Paris conference (1928). For instance the scientific and professional communities, represented by Iassw and Ifsw agreed to this statement during the Montreal conference (2000):

«The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work».

This was later reviewed at the Durban conference (2009) when the same organizations revised this definition and commenced a further review with the involvement, of all the representatives, both educational and professional using online questionnaires, seminars and workshops during regional or international meetings. It is worth noting the workshops during the Hong Kong conference (2010) and the Bruxelles (2011) European conference, ensured high levels of participation and



rich suggestions. This enterprise is in itself proving to be more complex than was foreseen, not only for the diverse meanings and variations with which social work is interpreted across the world. This has resulted in educational considerations in those countries where the profession is a recent phenomenon as on those continents where social work has been structured for more than one hundred years.

The final definition, drafted by Iassw and Ifsw, and later approved during the International conference of Melbourne 2014 by the general assembly, states: «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. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being». In this definition three new aspects should be highlighted.

First, that social work is not only defined as a profession based on practice, but also as an academic discipline. In the commentary that serves to unpack the core concepts, the interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary dimensions of social work that draw on a wide array of scientific theories and research along with the fact that social work is in a constant development are specified. Moreover, the uniqueness of social work research and theories is applied, emancipatory and very often co-constructed with service users in an interactive, dialogic process and therefore informed by specific practice environments. This aspect also allows for the promotion of indigenous knowledge that previously has been devalued, discounted, and hegemonised by western theories. In this way social work knowledge will be a result of a broader and anti-discriminatory process and will be more appropriately practised not only in local environments but also internationally.

A second important aspect is the fact that the definition underlines not only a generic social change, but also social development. Very important is the comment which states that «social development is conceptualized to mean strategies for intervention, desired end states and a policy framework. The latter in addition to more popular residual and the institutional frameworks. It is based on holistic biopsychosocial,



spiritual assessments and interventions that transcend the micro-macro divide, incorporating multiple system levels and inter-sectorial and inter-professional collaboration, aimed at sustainable development. It prioritizes socio-structural and economic development, and does not subscribe to conventional wisdom that economic growth is a prerequisite for social development».

The third element is related to the active involvement of the people in pursuing the social work aims, through defining the collective responsibility and the engagement of people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being, as a core aspect of social work practice.

2. What is international social work?

International social work (Mohan, 2008) is not necessarily what has been internationally defined as social work. This can be seen when we consider different authors that have discussed the problem since the middle of the 20th century. The reflection on international social work in the '40s and '50s seemed to restrict the attention to one particular field of activity, and stressed the importance of special knowledge and skills that the social worker should have to work for via international agencies, but also underlined the usefulness of exchanges between social workers through international conferences (Warren, 1939). Friedlander (1955; 1975) emphasized the importance of the international social work dimension for social workers employed in international agencies such as the Red Cross and the United Nations. Later Sanders and Pederson (1984), showed that the commitment of international social work should also be referred to the practice addressed specifically to immigrants and refugees, suggesting that ideas that support social workers to better understand different cultural backgrounds have to be provided in training in order to orient them to a higher sensitivity of the special needs that these people.

Hokenstad *et al.* (1992) highlighted the exchanges and the contacts that take place between social workers of different nations and suggested the possibility of creating an academic field of study geared to systematic comparison of social work in different parts of the world; together with various aspects such as the professional dimension, differ-



ent roles, methods used in practice, social work problems as well as the challenges they face.

The debate on the definition of international social work has been and is still very rich and interesting. Various proposals, from time to time, have focused on different aspects depending on whether the view adopted was global or more specific.

We can see from these references a broad concept of international social work, one that includes the ability to develop an understanding of the “whole”, the ability to transcend concerns related to local context and to interpret the role in a more comprehensive and global way. This notion, accepted by several authors, aims to promote an image of social work that enhances international links, educates professionals through a path that encourages a greater awareness of international phenomena and addresses these problems on a global scale. Midgley (2001) stated that through a broad, encompassing perspective based on a global consciousness, it is possible to recognize different dimensions of internationalization that focus, in turn, on comparative enquiry, professional collaboration and specific forms of practice in international agencies that requires appropriate knowledge and skills. However, some sceptical voices, like Mohan (2008), are also emerging. Although he recognises the importance of having new books directly or indirectly related to international social work, he is very critical about the status of theorization and points out that American «literature on international social work is in abundance but much of it lacks substance».

It is thus appropriate to refer to the definition of Lynn Healy (2012) which integrates and presents international social work as a multidimensional concept: «a way of looking and appreciating the world (worldview) and acknowledging the impact of globalization on human well-being; practice, including locally based practice, informed by international knowledge; practice, concern and actions on globally experienced social issues; participation in international professional organizations and dialogue; understanding the global profession; promotion of development and human rights and a future action-oriented movement for global change» (Healy, 2012: 12). Healy defines the interconnectedness between global issues and the practice and policy carried on by the nation-state, emphasises the importance of the purposes of international social work: «to promote global social justice



and human well-being to ensure the ongoing relevance of locally based practice by calling attention to global realities that affect local conditions» (Healy, 2012: 12).

3. The social work commitment to a broader visibility at international level

Different initiatives have been undertaken by international associations during the years of which the most important are: the World social work day and the definition of the Global agenda. Additionally the World social work day was established in 1983 by the International federation of social workers in conjunction, since 1990, with the International association of schools of social work. The two main goals of this work being to sensitize social workers, students and teachers about the importance of an organization like the Un (which has a strong affinity with the social work mission) and to make visible to the leaders of the United Nations, and ambassadors of various agencies of the importance and relevance of social work in the world. This also serves to highlight the commitment to realising the foundations and the ethical values of both social work and the Un promoting the development of people and community, as well as respect for human rights. The idea of getting together, ideally in a single day all over the world, to address important issues, work towards developing a common identity and supporting each other.

A further ambitious initiative stems from the idea that the social work voice, while it remains fragmented, has little chance of influencing the agenda of those institutions which pursue the protection and the development of human rights. For this reason, Iassw, Ifsw, Icsw have joined together to build the Social work agenda for the coming years. The decision to jointly undertake global conferences and to define a common agenda stems from the perceived need to be heard in socio-political contexts by the single nations or regions, as well as by the international organizations, such as the United Nations. It was with significant difficulty that social work succeeded in being represented in the Un, as well as influencing their statements and activities such as the values of social justice, human rights, and respect for the individual.



It has also been identified that the challenges which social work must cope with require a strong international commitment and new strategies. One cannot fail to recall, in this regard, the words of Alice Salomon, one of the people who have most contributed to the development of social work in Europe. Her assertion was that social injustices are a consequence of an unjust economic system that operates internationally and it therefore requires a global commitment.

The three organizations were also involved in collective actions in the past and have developed a vision locally, nationally and globally in response to issues and challenges such as poverty, social protection, human rights, community development, crisis and emergency intervention, peace-building processes, but also responding to phenomena such as disability, crisis in the different phases of individuals and families life span, building partnerships with service users and development of interdisciplinary practices and appropriate social policies. Many of these aspects are also included in the document of the Millennium development goals as well as in the Universal declaration of human rights, but a real commitment from a social work perspective is necessary to integrate social, economic and environmental issues for sustainable development.

The reworking of contributions from around 3,000 academics, social workers, students and representatives of various social organizations during the Hong Kong conference in June 2010 were included in «the agenda» for future years. Thus the representatives of the three organizations developed a draft document for worldwide discussion, with the belief that it was necessary to activate a collective and participatory process among all those who are involved in social work and social development, in order to draft a document to be presented during the international conference in Stockholm in 2012. Four main areas were chosen: social inequalities within countries and between regions; the dignity and worth of the person; environmental sustainability and the importance of human relationships. Each of these areas was then broken down and analysed with the four points summarized below.

The recent and ongoing economic crisis and the decisions by world leaders to divert of resources from social development to support the financial system – have created growing inequalities with the ever-increasing marginalization of populations. The lack of a social protec-



tion system and the processes of community disintegration have worsened conditions in many areas of the world. In respect of «dignity and worth of the person», there are still worldwide violations or failures of human rights at social, economic, cultural and political levels. Respect for diversity and different belief systems is critical; the political landscape and the processes of peace-building are increasingly unstable; violence and oppression by non-democratic governments is always present in different areas of the world. The phenomena of terrorism, along with the problematic state responses and modes of conflict management at the global level are growing. Challenges include responding to the problems of migration, refugees, human trafficking as well as the role of the professional practice, education and the social development all complicate these areas.

Environmental sustainability, along with more frequent natural and man-made disasters, requires government capacity, as well as community involvement in the development of appropriate responses. It is necessary to create preventive activities, as well as proactive involvement with communities to support social, human and environmental development. The protection of the physical environment should not be disconnected from a consideration of the implications for sustainable social development.

The importance of «human relationships» includes the concern that global changes are having on the family and interpersonal relationships as well as on critical events at different phases of the life span. Greater attention is required on children and families, an ageing population, disability and physical and mental illnesses, as well as addiction and domestic violence and corresponding strategies to improve the quality of people's lives.

4. Debate and prospects

In spite of the critical importance of international issues and the efforts of Iassw and Ifsw, the profession does not yet seem to adequately respond and international social work remains a minority topic of interest for a small expert group despite the rich debate. As Nagy and Falk (2000) highlight the failure to resolve an agreed definition was a formi-



dable barrier to internationalizing the curriculum and as a result there was a need for a clearer and shared definition of what is meant by international social work, identifying its nature and purpose so that the curricula could be expanded to encourage a broader perspective of the profession. It is important that education increases the understanding of global events, exploring their influence and consequences, thus recognizing international and cross-cultural dimensions of local issues and using knowledge, along with comparative perspectives, to contextualize its analysis and evaluate the possible intervention strategies (Lyons, Manion, Carlsen, 2006).

The two associations (Iassw and Ifsw) agreed Global standards for education and training identify nine sets of standards in respect of: the school's core purpose or mission statement; programme objectives and outcomes; programme curricula including fieldwork; core curricula; professional staff; social work students; structure, administration, governance and resources; cultural diversity; and social work values and ethics. Although this provides support for the international dimension of social work, the debate concerning the relationship between universalism, diversity and internationalization, are themes that are emerging in the process of reformulation of the international definition of social work and the Global standards. The risk is an overview of these issues which on the one hand is based on the prevalence of western systems of meaning (included in the core values on which social work takes its guidance) and on the indigenisation processes, which is likely to cause fissures which do not bode well for social work.

Greater awareness by social workers of the centrality of ethnic and national identity in people's lives is necessary alongside the recognition of the significant roles in promoting mutual understanding, tolerance and appreciation of diversity is necessary. Ahmadi (2003) declares that international social work can and should play an important role in consolidating democracy, social justice and in implementing international conventions (e.g. on human rights, on the elimination of discrimination against women, on the rights of the child) as well as in preventing conflicts and support peace through the promotion of a global culture of integration.



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