

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR CRIME PREVENTION AND THE REINTEGRATION  
OF OFFENDERS

# World Social Work Day 2015

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“Promoting Human Dignity  
and Worth of People”



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This is an extract of a paper entitled '**Professional standards of social work practice linked to human rights**'. The paper will be presented at the University of Fort Hare on the 17<sup>th</sup> March 2015 to mark World Social Work Day. The paper conceptualizes the notion of social work and human rights. It further provides the context that links social work to human rights.

## INTRODUCTION

Social Work Day has been celebrated at the United Nations for the past 30 years. 'The International Association of Schools of Social Work and the international Federation of Social Workers declared the third Tuesday of March every year as World Social Work Day. This allows the day to be celebrated at institutional, national, regional and global levels.' The theme for 2015 is '**Promoting the Dignity and Worth of Peoples**' relates to the second pillar of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development. A bottom-up movement that has been developed by social workers globally. 'The First Global Report on Social Work and Social Development: Promoting Social and Economic Equalities' was launched in Melbourne, Australia on 10 July 2014. "This marks a historic moment in the evolution of social work, bringing together practitioners, educators and social development workers in a shared vision", said Dr Rory Truell, IFSW Secretary-General.

The report is built on examples of effective social work practice from around the world, illustrating the essential contribution of social workers to communities. IFSW Global Agenda Coordinator, Dr David N Jones, said: "social workers have an ethical duty to focus the world's attention on the realities of social conditions and on the positive and effective solutions available to individuals, communities and governments". The report highlights the growing social crisis resulting from increasing inequality. The evidence from social work practice finds that people are happier and wellbeing is better for all in more equitable societies.



## THE CONTEXT

The massively unequal distribution of wealth causes more social instability, health and crime problems, negatively affecting everybody. Currently, social work is known for its critical and holistic approach to understanding and intervening in social problems. There are various social ills in the world and South Africa has merged from a history of apartheid with massive imbalances still existing despite the efforts by the government. Violence, Gang-related crime in schools, Substance abuse, Social problems and high-risk behaviour undermines human development and social cohesion.

Social stratification is evident and an overlapping and fragmented institutional framework is a stumbling block to social and economic uplifted of people. This year marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the freedom charter and a few strides have been done to fulfill the ideals of a democratic and free country in which all people live together and have equal opportunities. Challenges which poor people face needs to inform and shape national development strategies. The SA Constitution is “The mirror of the society we seek to create”. It promises to establish a society based on social justice, to improve quality of life of all citizens and to free the potential of each person.” The welfare sector also responded by changing policies to reflect the new South Africa. The developmental approach in line with the Constitution was adopted. Patel (2005) is of the view that “the developmental perspective to social welfare in SA is rooted in a rights-based approach. Human rights and social justice are the cornerstone of social development. The theme for human rights day is celebrating freedom charter and equality for all. This is a synergy with the Agenda theme, ‘Promoting the Dignity and Worth of people’ on world social work day. This clearly shows that there is a natural link between social work and human rights.

## THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION

Social Work is an internationally accepted profession and academic discipline recognized by the United Nations (UN) which hosts a special UN Social Work day every year. Social Work is concerned with improving the quality of life of people and



the promotion of peace, human rights, equality and social justice at local, regional, national and international levels. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work (IFSW, 2000). Social work education and training equips people to work with individuals, groups, organizations and communities in a range of contexts such as child and family welfare, specialist areas such as the aged, disabled, mental health, substance abuse and correctional services, HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. Gender issues, youth programmes, social policy, research, programme development, lobbying and advocacy, to mention a few.

## HUMAN RIGHTS PHILOSOPHY

Human rights are understood to be equal and inalienable rights to which people are entitled simply because they are human beings, regardless of their nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, religion or any other status. Human rights are formally expressed and codified in international human rights law, which consists of international human rights treaties and customary law. These treaties are particularly relevant to social work practice and action. The latter refers to practices which have been followed by numerous states over time and have been accepted by the community of states as legally binding.

Human rights are often categorized as first, second and third generations. First generation rights are civil and political rights, like the right to vote, freedom of speech, and freedom from discrimination, fair trial etc. Second generation rights are economic, social and cultural rights, like the right to health, housing, social security and education. Reference should also be made to what is termed third-generation or 'solidarity' human rights, which encompass, for example, the right to development, to self-determination, to peace and to a healthy environment. It is assumed that these rights should not only benefit individuals but also groups and peoples and that their realization requires global cooperation and solidarity.

## **LINKAGE BETWEEN SOCIAL WORK AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

The joy of social work is its depth, breath and scope of practice. Human rights are inseparable from social work theory, values, ethics and practice. Today social workers play various roles in line with various principles and code of ethics. The Code of Ethics goes on to state that two of the key values and principles are: human dignity and worth; and social justice. Human dignity and worth means that social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of every person and respect the human rights expressed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Social justice encompasses the satisfaction of basic needs; fair access to services and benefits to achieve human potential; and recognition of individual and community rights (Calma, 2008)

These values and principles in the Code of Ethics already establish the foundations for human rights based social work practice. They readily acknowledge human rights principles, explicitly the Universal Declaration. There is a history that clearly connects social work as a field to concerns about and advocacy around social justice and human rights. Some argue that the human-rights orientation is fundamental and foundational to social work practice in general. Social workers by very definition are human rights workers. Social workers help individuals and groups realize their rights everyday and are ideally placed to help communities claim their collective rights. IFSW's policy on human rights states amongst other things that "the Social Work profession accepts its share of responsibility for working to oppose and eliminate all violations of human rights". But what does human rights based social work practice look like in real life?

## **HUMAN RIGHTS PRINCIPLES ARE INCORPORATED IN ALL SPHERES OF SOCIAL WORK.**

In terms of social work practice, realizing first generation rights means advocacy either on behalf of individuals or disadvantaged groups. Social workers working in advocacy might be involved in the protection of civil and political rights through advocacy groups, refugee action groups or prisoner reform. Working to realize



second generation rights is the bread and butter work of most social workers. It involves putting services in place to meet rights like the right to education, health care, housing, income and so on. So, every time a social worker takes a client to assist them, or liaises with the various departments or refers them to various places for physical, social or emotional support they are engaging in a form of human rights work. A related point on these second generation rights is that unless services actually exist, these rights cannot be met. These rights are 'progressive' in nature. Social workers are **agents of change**.

Third generation rights are collective rights which intersect perfectly with the social work practice of community development. Community development is a way of working with, rather than for, communities to increase their capacity and ability to find their own solutions to problems. Social workers are facilitators for this process of change that occurs from the grass roots in a bottom-up way. The relationship between community development and human rights is so symbiotic that community development needs human rights based framework if it is to be successful, and human rights needs a community development framework if they are to be realized.

The marrying together of community development practices and human rights principles is being increasingly recognized at the United Nations level. The United Nations Common Understanding of a Human Rights Based Approach to Development Cooperation sets out necessary elements of policy development and service delivery under human rights based approach. People are recognized as key actors in their own development, rather than passive recipients of commodities and services. Patel (2005) emphasizes the point that individuals and client populations are subjects of rights. It means they are not the passive receivers of rights but they are active partners with those working for the realization of rights and together they have a shared interest. Participation is both a means and a goal and strategies are empowering, not disempowering.

The global standards in the social work profession identify the core purpose of social work in the global context. These clearly show how social workers promote the realization of human rights. Social workers facilitate the inclusion of marginalized



socially excluded, disposed, vulnerable and anti-risk groups of people. They address and challenge barriers, inequalities and injustices that rise in society. They assist and educate people to obtain services and resources in their communities. Formulating and implementing policies and programmes that enhance people's well being, promoting development and human rights and collective harmony and social stability. This shows that the social work promotion draws theories of human development and behaviour and social systems to analyze complex situations and to facilitate individual, organizational social and cultural changes (Calma, 2008).

## CONCLUSION

Human rights based social work is important in all the work we do. Human rights are not just lofty principles that get talked about at the United Nations or legal fraternity but they are our everyday experiences of getting our needs met and an expression of our shared humanity. They give social workers a framework for their advocacy, direct service and community development work, especially when social workers can often be the ones caught in the middle of the political mine field which is policy implementation. Human rights are above politics and ideology so they are a useful tool in arguing for change. Social workers have long been involved in advocacy and campaigning for social justice.

- We need to improve the standard of social work practice.
- We need to raise the integrity of the profession.
- More awareness needs to be raised regarding the activities of social work as human rights practice and of ways to build on individual case solutions to influence policy change.
- We need committed and passionate social workers
- We need a generation of social workers that are agents of change.
- We need a generation of social workers that protects, promotes and fulfill the rights of people in line with bills of rights in the constitution, regional and international obligations.

