



BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: EXPLORING SOCIAL WORK ETHICS AND VALUES AS A CONTRIBUTION TO A NEW ECO-SOCIAL WORLD

REPORT OF A WEBINAR SERIES AND GLOBAL SUMMIT MARCH-JULY 2022

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Background

Introduction

This report summarises the findings of an international project on the theme of ‘Beyond the pandemic: Exploring social work ethics and values as a contribution to a new eco-social world’. This was undertaken during March – July 2022 as a follow-on to an online survey on ethical challenges for social workers during Covid-19 conducted in May 2020 (Banks et al, 2020a; b). The 2020 survey showed social workers rethinking their values and ethics in a time of crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The rationale behind this second phase of research was to review the learning from two years of practice during the pandemic, considering its relevance to other global crises linked particularly with climate change, also political conflict and various types of natural disaster. It was designed to contribute to the online People’s Global Summit (‘Co-building a new eco-social world: leaving no one behind’), co-organised by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) and multi-disciplinary partners from 29th June to 2nd July 2022 (www.newecosocialworld.com).

The aim of the project was to consider how social work ethics and values can contribute towards sustainability and justice for people and the planet. The objectives were to understand and identify:

- What are the ethical dimensions of rethinking the role of social work in contributing to a new eco-social world?
- How can learning from the pandemic be used to tackle other social and environmental crises?
- What is or should be the role of the social work profession in working towards a sustainable world?

The study was conducted by members of the Social Work Ethics Research Group (SWERG) in collaboration with the IFSW Ethics Commission. Durham University, UK, awarded the project a small grant (through its Economic and Social Research Council Impact Acceleration Account) for research assistance and granted ethical approval for the project. A series of Zoom webinars was designed and organised by SWERG and IFSW in various regions of the world during March – May 2022, leading to a keynote presentation and live panel discussion at the People’s Global Summit on 1st July 2022.

This report offers reflections from analysis of recordings of small and large group discussions in the webinars and discussion at the live panel, identifying critical components of the role of social work in a 'new eco-social world'. Although the summit organisers did not explicitly define what was meant by a 'new eco-social world', we took it to mean a world underpinned by respect and care of people for each other and the planet, alongside greater equity in distribution of harms and benefits, with the hyphen signifying the interconnectedness of ecological and social systems. The word 'new' indicates that this world would be significantly different from the one we inhabit now. The call for people to join the Summit refers to a vision based on:

... values that shape policies and practices to ensure sustainability and good quality life-cycles – not only for each human being but for each part of our eco-systems on which we all depend, leaving no one behind (www.newecosocialworld.com/).

Methods

Members of SWERG and the IFSW Ethics Commission planned a series of 1.5-hour webinars open to anyone in the social work field who was interested. They were advertised through IFSW and national social work networks, and participants registered to join. The webinars were jointly facilitated by SWERG and IFSW members, and had plenary introductory and concluding sessions, with most of the time allocated to working in facilitated breakout groups. The webinars were recorded, with permission, and transcribed. SWERG and IFSW worked together to draft a set of questions to be used to frame small group discussions in the webinars. These were refined following the first (European region) webinar, with the final version as follows:

Question 1. During the pandemic, many social workers faced complex ethical challenges and had to rethink how to put their ethical principles into practice.

- a) How did practising during the pandemic prompt you to rethink your professional ethics and values?
- b) What did you do differently?
- c) Can you give positive examples?

Question 2. You have observed a lot about social and environmental conditions in your career as a social worker.

- a) What is one policy you wish you could change?
- b) As a profession, with the aims of equality, social justice and realising the

rights of all people, what values, policies and practices would we like to see being adopted as a framework globally and locally in context of the People's Global Summit?

Question 3. What examples do you have of social workers achieving social and environmental transformation?

Question 4. Is there anything else anyone would like to add?

Four webinars were facilitated in English for the IFSW regions: Europe (29th March); North America (13th April), Africa (29th April) and Asia Pacific Region (2nd May), with two additional webinars in Arabic (28th March) and Farsi (22nd April). Due to unavailability of IFSW colleagues, we were unable to hold a Spanish-speaking webinar for the Latin America and Caribbean region of IFSW. Webinars had global audiences drawn from social work practitioners, educators, students, representatives from national social work associations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The total number of registered participants was 285, with the attendance ranging from 8 to 36 people in each webinar.

Notes were made during the breakout groups, and these were collated by the research assistant (Lynne Cairns) along with the transcribed and cleaned audio-recordings. These were read by the research assistant and principal investigator (Sarah Banks), who drew out key themes linked to the focus of the study, following a traditional thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Our interest was not necessarily in what were the most dominant themes in the conversations (such as how difficult life had been during the pandemic), but in noting insights expressed by participants relevant to rethinking social work ethics during and beyond the pandemic, and the development of 'eco-social' thinking (that is, linking social and environmental issues and/or seeing the social aspects of life as integrated into ecological systems). The following themes were identified as significant for our study:

- Ethical challenges during the pandemic caused a rethinking of ethics in social work practice in relation to: a) self-care; b) digital working; c) less bureaucracy, more discretion and creativity.
- Importance of a holistic approach in relation to: a) people and planet; b) working with communities.
- Social work's contribution to social and environmental transformation in relation to: a) social workers as skilled experts in social protection and sustainable development; b) extending the concept of justice (from social to ecological).

The transcripts were ordered in two ways: first, all the responses to each question were put together; and secondly, sections of text relevant to each of the above themes were collated. These were then shared with other members of the research team, who worked on developing the nuances of different themes. These were checked and elaborated upon by other group members in several meetings in preparation for a pre-recorded [keynote presentation](#) summarising the findings to date, and [live panel](#) (with questions) at the People's Global Summit on 1st July 2022.

Findings

We will now discuss each of the identified themes under three broad headings linked to the main areas of questioning used in the webinar break out groups.

1. Rethinking ethics during the pandemic: self-care, digital working, less bureaucracy

Overall participants in the webinars engaged very fully with the first set of questions around rethinking ethics during the pandemic, which provoked energetic and rich discussions. While in most countries social workers were operating under fewer Covid-related restrictions in 2022 than in 2020 and had adapted to new ways of working, participants' responses suggest that Covid-19 was still an enduring feature of everyday life and social work practice. Participants were keen to share their experiences of working during the early stages of the pandemic, which were often traumatic, confusing and exhausting as well as requiring creativity and flexibility. Participants described drawing upon their social work ethics and values as guiding principles for navigating restrictions and developing very creative approaches as they adapted their practice.

a) Self-care

The heightened need for self-care during the pandemic, that is, care of social workers for their own and their families' well-being, was a recurring theme in the webinars. The report of the Farsi webinar stated: 'self-care was the most repeated issue for social workers'. This was linked with the increased risks and stresses social workers faced, including not being recognised as key workers, not getting adequate protective equipment and lacking consistent or any managerial guidance. This was a particularly strong theme in the North America webinar, in which a Canadian social worker discussing what self-care entails made the analogy with an aeroplane emergency, when you must first put on your own oxygen mask before helping others.

Although often referred to as 'self-care', clearly participants were indicating the need for better working conditions and support by employing institutions, which could be construed as employee rights. If we extend the aeroplane analogy, we might expect working oxygen masks to be provided. But in a crisis when these are not available, social workers may be left to look out for themselves individually and collectively, as well as feeling a responsibility towards people using services. Webinar participants reported that some social workers died, including from Covid-19 or suicide. Others left the profession passively (not returning after quarantine), or actively (choosing other occupations). Staffing challenges made workloads even more impossible for the staff who remained. Some employment settings proved untrustworthy or exploitative, with employers withholding information or protective equipment from social workers and pushing telehealth for efficiency in conditions for which it was unsuited.

The discussions in the webinars highlighted the importance of collective self-care by social workers, and advocacy on behalf of the profession. Examples were given from Kenya, Spain, Portugal, Iran and Greece of social workers supporting each other, advocating collectively and instituting regular peer meetings to identify and address problems. A Canadian social worker spoke about: 'people banding together, organizing and fighting for the common good'. This was echoed by a social worker from Kenya who commented: 'despite facing all the challenges we still tried to see we were able to maintain our unique culture of togetherness and supporting each other'.

These discussions raise the question about whether it is ethically right for social workers to accept unreasonable working conditions, requests and workloads, even in a crisis.

b) Digital working

By March-May 2022, social workers in many countries had a lot of experience of working remotely – particularly digital working. They could see its advantages during periods of restricted contact and its potential to facilitate more communication with people needing or using services than pre-pandemic, provided they had digital access. Webinar participants could also see the potential post-pandemic to make it easier for some people to receive services without travelling. As this Indian social worker commented, it makes it possible to 'reach out to people who are isolated – that's recurrent'. Participants in the North America webinar also noted the advantage of people who were sick in hospital, or confined in other institutions, being able to connect with family members virtually, even including doctors in the conversation: 'Before the pandemic we couldn't do it because there

was a strict law ... The pandemic made us all rethink the way we do things'. Another point made in some of the discussion groups was that the move to digital has enabled more meetings of social workers for mutual support and learning, including global connectivity and the creation of new networks.

In addition to being a force for social inclusion, participants acknowledged that certain people would remain excluded by digital technologies. Participants from Nepal, South Africa and Zambia reported that many people in need of social work services during the pandemic did not have cell phones or internet access. Even with such access, there were doubts about how to maintain the quality of service, including how to establish trusting relationships, ensure cyber-security, protect privacy and confidentiality, make thorough assessments and provide services according to need. The difficulties were very evident in work with older people, children at risk or households where perpetrators and victims of domestic violence co-habited. As a USA social worker commented: 'suicides, death notifications, sexual assault ... we can't telework those situations, right?' Social workers in the Arabic-speaking webinar discussed how they had adapted to using digital and telephonic resources to provide social support and advice, with a new code of ethics being provided in Saudi Arabia for these new approaches.

Use of digital technology can be a force for both inclusion and exclusion, and for both the expansion of care and the diminution of privacy. This highlights the need for careful and sensitive decision-making regarding when to use it, raising questions about when it is right to retain in-person services and when to blend the modes of communication.

c) Less bureaucracy, more creativity

Much social work takes place within administrative or legal frameworks of rules and procedures. These are designed to ensure that established processes are applied to people needing or using services and resources are distributed effectively and efficiently. Regulation tends to be greater in statutory social work and in the global north. In the European and North American webinars, the temporary relaxation or inapplicability of some of the regulations and administrative procedures was raised as an opportunity for social workers to exercise discretion and creativity. For example, they were expected to make judgments about whether to visit people in their own homes in exceptional cases, and they were able to provide emergency assistance such as food and money extremely quickly through streamlined rather than complex processes.

Examples were shared where the ‘care and control’ continuum, often debated in social work, had become weighted towards participatory relationship-based social work, away from more coercive practices. A Danish social worker spoke about what he thought was the positive impact of not having to monitor whether job seekers were making the required number of job applications:

... in many ways, social workers felt in that part of social work, working with the unemployed, that they had a better connection, better relation to the citizens, because they did not have to control if they had applied for three jobs ... and they did not have to meet up every week to document that they are still job seekers. So in many ways, it has been a discussion after the pandemic, can we stay with that regulation? Because in that sense, it's easier to do the social work, it's easier to handle ethically and not spend that much energy on the control part of social work.

A Spanish social worker recounted having to challenge bureaucracy when their manager was following an inappropriate protocol. In the North American webinar, a social worker spoke about professional discretion being needed to manage rules, and the importance being able to ‘think outside the box to meet the needs of clients’. This was echoed in the report of the Farsi-speaking webinar, which concluded that: ‘Social work services are to a large extent creative and based upon intuition’.

While there was not a lot of discussion of this topic in the webinars, it raises an important point of learning from the early stages of the pandemic regarding how social work can be done differently if social workers are less constrained by rules and regulations. The pandemic created emergency conditions that allowed or even encouraged creativity and discretion. This raises the question: Is there a greater role for discretion and creativity in social work practice now the emergency is over?

2. Social and environmental conditions: values, policies and practices for the future

The second area of questioning recognised that social workers would have direct experiences of, and observations about, social and environmental conditions, and invited them to discuss values, policies and practices for the future. This generated a lot of discussion, with a dominant focus on social (as opposed to environmental) conditions. This may reflect the overwhelming nature of the social aspect of the social work role in addressing inter-personal relationships, family crises and income poverty, for example, leaving little space to consider how social work can engage with environmental issues. It may also reflect a conceptual and practical split between ‘the social’ and ‘the environmental’. In discussions about contexts where

environmental destruction is more ‘visible’ and is impacting on people’s lives, bridges between social and environmental concerns were clearer and the role of social work in addressing these issues was more tangible.

Although most of the social workers in the webinars did not have a readily expressible conceptual framework or set of values that might be described as ‘eco-social’, some did express the need for more ‘holistic’ philosophies (seeing people and planet as inter-linked) and practices (working with communities rather than just individuals), which we now outline.

a) Holism – people and planet

Discussion in the webinars highlighted at least two ways of looking at people and planet holistically: seeing people as whole beings; and seeing people as part of the ecosystem.

The importance of seeing people as whole beings – some participants commented that initially Covid-19 was primarily seen as creating a health care or medical emergency, and the social implications (isolation, unemployment, etc) were ignored or not prioritised. As this Nigerian social worker commented:

Even those who were treated for Covid, they still couldn’t get the psycho-social support to give them a wholeness of wellness ... and we were pained as social workers ... we need social workers to give the completeness that is required.

This links with the importance of recognition of the role of social workers discussed in section 3 of the findings, which was a common theme across the webinars. But it goes further than simply saying the social side of people’s lives is important, it expresses this at a more existential level in terms of wholeness and completeness. The prolonged neglect of people’s overall well-being became a pressing issue shared between social workers in various places. This was expressed by a North American social worker who said that social workers should step up and serve as a voice for the communities in which they work: ‘hey we can’t just not pay attention to how this is mentally, emotionally, economically, socially, impacting all of us’.

Seeing people as inter-connected and as part of the ecosystem – The idea of human inter-connectedness was most clearly expressed in the African webinar, with recurring discussion of ‘ubuntu’. Ubuntu is a traditional African philosophy that sees humans as interdependent (‘I am because we are’), and espouses values such as mutual support, warmth and generosity. This was expressed by a Nigerian social worker as follows:

there should be love, there should be compassion, there should be empathy for each human being, because each life matters ... and for us to exist as human beings in this world, we need to protect one another, we need to show love to one another, we need to be caring, and those are the values of the social worker.

Taking this further, a Zambian social worker reflected: 'If ubuntu became ... the cornerstone of what we take as the meaning of life I think we would have created a better world for ourselves'.

The meaning and practice of ubuntu often seems to focus on the interconnectedness of people with each other ('ubuntu' can be translated as 'humanity'). However, when located in a broader African worldview, humans are already understood as part of an environmental and spiritual world, in a way that is perhaps less common in many cultures in the global north.

Ubuntu was a particular focus of discussion in the live panel at the People's Global Summit. Questions from participants included whether adoption of ubuntu worldwide was possible (given different cultural contexts) and/or whether it would amount to cultural appropriation if adopted in Europe, for example. The response from African participants was that ubuntu was adaptable and the values of humanity made sense in any context. Indeed, in the European webinar, although not referring to ubuntu as such, a Spanish social worker commented: 'I want to see social workers seeing, thinking more systematically - we are part of the environment'. This theme also arose in the North American webinar, with a Canadian social worker articulating the importance of indigenous worldviews, which are undervalued in current North American social work. In the same webinar, an academic criticised western, dualistic values (e.g. separation of mind/body, humans/environment).

The issue of how to shift social work from its traditional focus on humans and 'the social' to a more ecological worldview and practice will be an on-going challenge in a world, and in local contexts, where immediate social problems are increasing.

b) Holism – working with communities

There were frequent reflections in the webinars about how the pandemic repositioned social work within local communities. Participants shared different ways they had harnessed their deep knowledge of communities and social infrastructures to respond to issues exacerbated by the emergency such as poverty, abuse, violence and addiction, alongside new forms of social distress and isolation. The impact of the pandemic made some social workers more aware of their dual identities as individuals within their own communities, who also practice as social workers.

Social workers also became increasingly aware of the geographical and structural barriers that limit community mobilisation and relations. In areas of North America and Nepal, for example, remote and rural areas were reported as facing geographical challenges alongside inequalities in income, health care and digital resources. In other contexts, the barriers were perceived as more institutional, as illustrated by a senior officer in a UK professional association:

We really need to learn from what actually happened, with social workers being more connected with communities and not being so much within the offices and the institutions. And, for me, that's a bit of an unknown, because British social work is not really out there with communities and, generally, it's quite institutionalised ... I would be very interested to know how what's happened in the pandemic helps us push towards a more community-facing, community asset-building ... that sort of sustainability.

Many participants spoke about a greater sense of connection with other social workers nationally and internationally. Social workers in Kenya and Uganda formed an online group to develop mutual support around the pressures and challenges of working in the pandemic. According to a Kenyan social worker, this enabled them to meet their needs for personal growth 'even as we serve our community ... despite facing all these challenges, we still tried to see how we could maintain our unique culture of togetherness and supporting each other'.

In Afghanistan, social workers developed a network called the Child Protection Action Network of social workers in response to concerns about child welfare during the pandemic. According to an Afghan social worker, it started from a small group in a small district and grew 'step by step, from community up to the agencies' into an established and sustained collaborative network engaged in communities of all provinces of the country.

However, several discussions noted that social workers' close relationships with communities may generate tensions around whom they serve and how to balance conflicting expectations. It is important to recognise the positions of power and privilege social workers occupy and how complicit social work itself can be in the oppression experienced by the most vulnerable and marginalised people in communities. As a Canadian social work academic commented, social workers pay lip service to critical practice, but 'neoliberal capitalism does not want social workers practising from a critical point of view; they want passive, docile social workers'.

The challenge beyond the pandemic is to consider the role of social work not only in supporting community-based networks of care, but also engaging in communities of action to bridge the ‘eco’ and the ‘social’ aspects of life.

3. Social work’s contribution to social and environmental transformation

In this section we consider the role of social workers, about which there was quite a lot of discussion in relation to working during the pandemic, although less about their role in environmental transformation. We then explore social justice as a key underpinning value, motivating social workers to action, and how it may need to be re-invigorated and extended.

The role of social workers as skilled experts in social protection and sustainable development

Lack of recognition of the contribution of social workers was repeatedly raised in the webinars. During the pandemic they experienced lack of status as key workers, suffering from a failure to be provided with protective equipment. Yet as time went on, it became apparent that the crisis of Covid-19 was not just a health crisis, but a social crisis and social workers had a key role to play:

During the Covid pandemic social workers were able to stand out and were able to be counted ... so I think that was one of the influences [on recent legislation recognising social work in Zambia] (Zambian social worker).

However, in many webinars it seemed difficult to identify examples of social and environmental transformation, although there was strong agreement that social work needed to play a role. Valuable illustrations included a participant from Hawaii contributing to community action against oil pollution in community water supplies, and social workers in Zambia needing to engage in community education around alternative energy sources delicately balancing the ‘lifeline’ of charcoal burning as fuel with the impact of burning on climate change. In South Africa, social workers engaged in gardening and recycling projects to stimulate community learning around environmental issues, such as saving water and using alternative materials for energy. A Nigerian social worker recommended that the input of social workers, especially those in the community development field, should be made compulsory in projects funded by the World Bank and international aid agencies.

The need for social workers to collaborate with environmental activist movements was stressed by a Canadian social worker, citing social work’s role in many other social movements ‘organising and fighting for the common good’. Summing up the

challenges for social workers, this New Zealand social worker remarked:

There are the environmental ... sustainability issues. All of those things are huge; it's very complex and significant. But I guess that rather than being overwhelmed by the complexity of it, is also acknowledging that we as a profession have the foundations through our values and through our ethics to provide leadership across other professions as well. So yes, we do need to keep evolving our thinking and our work, but we do provide the opportunity to lead our community and lead other professions to adopt some of our values as well.

Re-invigorating and extending the value of social justice

In addition to the relational values arising particularly in discussions of ubuntu (e.g. care, reciprocity, collective responsibility and mutual respect), and the professional values relevant to digital working (e.g. privacy, confidentiality, safety), the importance of social justice was also raised, although not always explicitly named. Social justice is one of the key values in social work – related to promoting fair distribution of resources, power and privileges. It was often implicit in discussions of how the pandemic had exacerbated inequities in the experience of social harms. An Australian academic commented:

I would like to see more emphasis on social justice, the transformative potential of social work, moral and ethical dilemmas in context ... it's important that in seeking international cooperation we don't replicate a western colonialist stance.

The reference to 'a western colonialist stance' links to a comment made in the North American webinar about the importance of 'cultural justice', that is ensuring that the values, practices and power of certain peoples, cultures, traditions and nations are not under-valued or diminished, and that historic and current inequities are tackled. As this Canadian social work academic commented:

The importance of cultural justice ... Indigenous people ... and the particular impacts on them of the pandemic ... the importance of highlighting and integrating that into this discussion going forward.

Although also not named as such, some of the conversations were also framed in terms of what we might recognise as 'contributory' or 'epistemic' justice – whereby traditionally marginalised people contribute equally to collective understandings of their experiences and have their knowledge and resources acknowledged. This is implied in the following reflection in the report of the Farsi-speaking webinar: 'Policies are always written in a patriarchal and top-down way, while a bottom-up approach may result in more effective outcomes'.

A final extension of the concept of social justice, which was not directly referenced in the webinars, is ecological justice. This goes beyond environmental justice, which focuses on preserving the natural environment for the benefit of humans – an essentially anthropocentric (human-focussed) approach. It relies on a more holistic conception of rights, as espoused in the People’s Charter emerging from the Summit:

Holistic Rights recognize individual human rights, (dignity and fundamental freedoms), social human rights, (civil, economic, and political), cultural rights, eco-system rights, and the broader rights of nature (People’s Global Summit, 2022).

Ecological justice gives equal rights to non-human beings, such as animals, and to other entities such as plants, the sky and oceans (e.g. to an adequate habitat, to non-pollution). While the report of the Farsi webinar noted that ‘social workers are now more thinking of green social work’, this topic was not explored in depth in any of the webinars. It remains a large challenge for social work and social workers worldwide to consider how they can promote both social and ecological justice, that is, eco-social justice, linked to more holistic conceptions of rights beyond those of humans.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Key messages and questions

The conversations in the webinars furnished us with a range of accounts of social workers’ experiences, ideas and suggestions for future action. The webinars cannot be regarded as representative of all parts of the world, nor all types of social work. But they did generate rich qualitative narratives, and opportunities for dialogue between people from different parts of very large regions (e.g. people in the Asia Pacific webinar lived in places as far apart as Nepal and New Zealand). While the nature of the social work regimes, experiences of the pandemic and the effects of climate change were very varied across different countries, there were nevertheless many commonalities in participants’ stories and views, and much enthusiasm for shared learning as a global community of social workers.

There were many messages emerging from the webinars, as noted in each section of this report. In looking to the future, and in particular considering the importance of social work values and ethics in co-building a new eco-social world, we identified several key messages. The first three listed below relate to on-going issues of social

workers' day-to-day (micro-level) practice, which were highlighted during the pandemic. The last four relate to bigger-picture (macro-level) issues of how social workers understand and inhabit the world, what kind of world it should be and what role they should take in co-building this world with others. Of course, the answers to the questions posed by the micro-level issues are linked to the answers to the macro-level questions. But for now, we will identify them separately, briefly summarising what we see as the key messages and posing a question at the end of each summary. These questions can be used by social workers, educators and students to engage in further discussion of the issues raised in this report.

Issues in everyday practice

- **Self-care** is important in social work, and many other social and health care services, but this should not substitute for care and support from employers, even in times of emergency. This is a perennial issue, but was particularly highlighted by the pandemic and should be addressed in contexts where resources and staffing are inadequate to meet needs of potential or existing service users.

Question: When should social workers take risks, pushing the boundaries to support service users, and when should they protect themselves and their families, conserve their energy and recognise that their employers or other agencies also have responsibilities for community well-being?

- **Digital working** has potential for both social inclusion and exclusion of people providing, using or needing social work services. It also has the potential to cut down on travel and carbon emissions and to enable productive global connections. But much care needs to be taken in deciding when and how to use it.

Question: How can digital practice be inclusive and fair, and balanced with in-person working?

- **Bureaucracy**, including regulations, procedures and directive guidelines, has grown in social work in many parts of the world, particularly the global north. The relaxation or inapplicability of some regulations during the pandemic created space for use of professional discretion and creativity, which should be capitalised upon in the future.

Question: How can bureaucracy be reduced, while also ensuring the space for discretion does not overburden social workers and create inequities in access to services and resources?

Bigger picture issues

- **Holism – people and planet** refers to a need to work on the integration of social, economic and environmental elements of people's lives and for social workers to develop a more ecological worldview. This involves not just seeing the physical environment as a backdrop to human lives, but seeing humans as both inter-connected with each other and as one part of a fragile ecosystem.

Question: How do we encourage an eco-social worldview in a profession that has traditionally focused on human beings and their social lives?

- **Holism – working with communities** refers to the importance of seeing the interconnections between people and of working at neighbourhood level, or with communities of interest, to strengthen mutual support and care. While this is part of the social work role, in some areas of the world it has been neglected in favour of individual and family casework. The mobilisation of community support and advocacy networks during the pandemic has highlighted the importance of community-oriented work.

Question: How can and should social workers focus more attention on community-led initiatives for eco-social change?

- **The role of social workers as skilled experts in social protection and sustainable development** refers to the need for social workers to be more visible as key workers in times of crisis and more generally. If they can adopt a more holistic worldview and set of practices, then they can identify, cultivate and make visible their vital role in working alongside citizens, other professionals and agencies for positive social change.

Question: How can social workers put their expertise into practice, with others, to co-build an eco-social world?

- **Re-invigorating and extending the value of social justice** entails setting this traditional social work value about promoting equity of power and resources in the context of a holistic worldview and commitment to social protection and sustainable development. It then becomes clear that the value needs not only to be re-stated, but also extended to include cultural justice (valuing and not oppressing minority cultures), contributory justice (facilitating traditionally marginalised people to contribute their thinking and experience

to knowledge and policy-making) and ecological justice (respecting the natural world and the possibility of non-human entities being regarded as bearers of rights).

Question: How seriously should social workers commit to ecological justice, without diminishing their social justice mission, and how can we conceptualise and practice eco-social justice?

Concluding comments

There is an increasing number of social workers, including students and new graduates, who aspire to social and environmental transformation. They are our future (Australian social work academic).

In his speech at the opening ceremony of the Global People's Summit, Kumi Naidoo (a South African climate activist) characterised the present time as 'the most consequential decade in human history' (Naidoo, 2022). He also referred to the need for people to have 'the courage to contest'. The many and varied contributions to the Summit illustrated the urgent need to contest the increasing inequities in the world and the received ideas about seeking economic growth at the expense of a habitable planet. Social workers have a key role to play in this project, alongside people from other groups represented at the Summit – from health workers to trade unionists and young climate activists. The People's Charter, the outcome statement from the People's Global Summit (2022) outlines a vision for a new eco-social world, and how the assumptions and actions of people and politicians need to change if we are to achieve it. The values that lie at the heart of this vision are those social workers should be able to sign up to, as they resonate strongly with the stated values of the profession, including those based on practices of care, community, respect, equity and social justice.

However, the discussions in our social work webinars suggest that some of these values need re-stating, re-invigorating and extending in the context of eco-social thinking and action in social work. Building on the experience of the pandemic and looking to the future, it will be important to continue to contest the bureaucratic and controlling features of social work, strengthen the capacity of social workers and their organisations to care, recognise and build interconnections between people and planet and extend the concept and practice of social justice - re-emphasising cultural and contributory justice and integrating ecological justice. This would entail committing to the value of eco-social justice, working on understanding what this means in theory and practice and changing attitudes and actions to live out this value in social work.

While theories, concepts and practices of what is variously called environmental, ecological and green social work have been growing in recent years (see Besthorn, 2017; Dominelli, 2018), and the value of holistic philosophies such as ubuntu is being recognised (Mugumbate and Chereni, 2020), the webinars suggest there is considerable work to be done to develop and integrate these ideas in the mainstream theory and practice of social work globally. This would entail adopting a more holistic worldview based on eco-social justice, and a more contextualised ethics that is rooted in local environments and cultures, while also global and planetary in outlook and concerns.

The People's Charter that came out of the Summit offers a global vision for change addressed to world leaders and applicable to all people and professions. The task for the social work profession now is to integrate this high-level vision into social work education and policy, and work out how to put it into practice in all local contexts. This is challenging, because as Boetto (2016) points out, social work is a human-centred practice, which developed alongside and is located within an environmentally exploitative capitalist system. It may therefore be regarded as part of the problem (welfare systems prop up existing regimes of power and injustice) as much as the solution to the eco-social crisis of environmental degradation and human inequities. A paradigm shift in social work is required to build on and move beyond the people-centred values of care, community and compassion and the professionalised values of privacy, confidentiality and accountability towards the planet-centred values of eco-social justice and holistic rights.

Recommendations

Drawing on the findings of the webinars and our conclusions, the following recommendations are suggested for consideration:

1. **Social workers** need to recognise that they have a key role in identifying and acting on social problems in the context of environmental challenges and in advocating for, and proactively adopting, holistic approaches to their work.
2. **Social work educators** need to develop programmes of study that enable practitioners to gain necessary theoretical and practical competence to understand and implement eco-social approaches and to organise for local and global change to challenge human inequities and environmental degradation.

3. **Policy-makers, other professionals and members of the public** should acknowledge the essential role of social workers in promoting social and ecological sustainability, and provide the funding, space and commitment to enable and support social worker involvement.
4. **International and national associations for social work** should consider reviewing the *Global Definition of Social Work*, *Global Statement of Ethical Principles* and national statements to acknowledge the importance of eco-social justice and social workers' role in its promotion.

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