

Keynote Address to EUSW Summer School
**“Social work in an Intercultural Context – How to Embrace Diversity to
Promote Social Cohesion”**

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Today I am going to discuss the topic of **human rights and social work practice in a diverse society**. In this discussion I will address the question of human rights in social work practice and the correlation between diversity and social cohesion. My proposal is that the social work profession continue to champion and shape a human rights discourse within the current democratic order.

On 9 April 1946, the Austrian Federal Government announced a competition for the text of a new national anthem. It was to be "a song of hymn-like character paying tribute in words and music to the new Austrian federal state and its people both at home and abroad." The old anthem melody could not be used because of its association with the Nazi regime. The lyrics were written by Paula von Preradovic and music compiled by either Johann Holzer or Wolfgang Mozart. This verse has been translated into English so it can be understood here to day.

*Land of mountains, land on the river,
Land of fields, land of cathedrals,
Land of hammers, rich in outlook.
You are the native home of great sons,
A people uniquely gifted for the beautiful,
Much applauded Austria.*

Singing the national anthem is a ritual in Austrian schools. This ritual holds the promise of a common identity and a set of shared values and beliefs - offering those involved a sense of belonging and of social cohesion towards a common aspiration.

We, the members of the human race - have a history of seeking common ground and understanding on local and global levels. On the one hand this common ground offers the connotation of a place of *warmth... comfort... and affection* and, on the other hand, it emphasizes the reality of being in a less privileged position where this common ground has yet to be found. As a social worker these practical realities are the focus of my day-to-day work.

Human beings are becoming more globally interconnected through a vast range of accomplishments and advancements and it is of critical importance for the well-being

of all people that clearly defined principles and standards are employed to assure that human accomplishments are made accessible for everyone. In this regard human rights offer a baseline that bridges differences and helps people to feel connected within a common identity and, as such, remain commitment to a common good. Human rights are universal in that they define and cohere us as individuals through our substantiated needs and, in doing so, remind us of our common human identity. While this is not a new issue, there has never been a greater sense of urgency to address it. Aside from exposing the inherent fallacy of *ethnicity, gender, class, age, religious identity and sexual orientation*, human right principles highlight the necessity of embracing diversity in order to ensure social justice.

The private sector is at the forefront of the realization that by embracing diversity the benefits of people's differences are maximized and challenges such as communication problems and interpersonal conflicts can be reduced.

The social work profession is a facilitator of change and reform incorporating the transformation of *attitudes, belief systems, and behaviors*, a challenge that requires a foundation of leadership. This process of change and transformation requires *initiative, insight, and integrity* in order increase levels of self-understanding and responsible action and enable the true appreciation of diversity.

How can social workers prepare for this reality and the challenges and opportunities it brings?

We can begin (1) by recognizing that our responses to diversity are connected to the fulfillment of tangible substantive human needs. Basic human needs which the International Federation of Social Workers translated into the professional understanding as equivalent to positive rights,

(2) Secondly, we can strive to promote the inclusion of those who have been historically marginalized thereby encouraging mainstream society to view all members as valuable in the quest for societal development.

I wish to point out here that the ongoing debate regarding integration problems in Vorarlberg, has less to do with *diversity of culture, religious identity and language* but more *the economic inequality* experienced by people with migration background

(Walz, 2004, p. 19). Denying the rights of people with cultural heritages differing from that of the mainstream society is equivalent to the denial of human dignity.

In 1996 the International Federation of Social Workers condensed human rights into two goals:

- *The struggle for dignity*
- *The struggle for fundamental freedoms*

Both of these aims support the notion of enabling the full development of human potential. The International Federation of Social Workers stipulates that the core values of *dignity and respect for the inherent worth of each person* is the value base central to social work as a profession and discipline. Respect means receiving the minimum recognition of basic human rights. The philosopher, Avishai Margalit, argues that to deny a minimum recognition of basic human rights is equivalent to the denial of dignity. To possess human dignity is to possess a value, which commands respect in the sense of commanding the acknowledgement of human rights belonging to every person. Recognizing the universality of human rights by upholding the value of dignity can provide social work with a basis in its struggle for social cohesion (Ife, 2004). It is within this context that social work seeks to sustain and develop intelligible practices to meet human needs in ways consistent with human dignity.

A renowned social work academic and founding member of the social work theoretical foundation at the Zurich University of Applied Science, Silvia Staub-Bernasconi, bases her theoretical approach on the general normative theory of action (Obrecht, 1996/Staub-Bernasconi 2007/ Geiser, 2000). This theory is supported by a set of scientifically researched procedures that are applied to recognize and distinguish between *analytical, resource orientated and procedural errors and acts that are committed with the interest of self-benefit*. The objective is to correct these incidents in order to achieve an improvement in the correlation between values- and aims within existing or socially created realities. The foundation of this theory is a scientific set of standards based on the theory of biological, psychological, social and cultural needs, needs which have to be met for each and everyone of us in order for our well-being and, in end effect, our very survival (Bunge, 1989/ Obrecht, 1996 /

Klassen, 2004). One of the developmental outcomes of this theory is a strong advocacy for the adoption of human rights perspective in both social work practice and theory. As I mentioned earlier, the International Federation of Social Workers concluded that human rights are the resulting transition from a needs orientation to rights affirmation. Staub-Bernasconi demonstrated the importance of including human rights education in social work curriculums with particular focus on the Germanic context (Walz, 2004, p. 19) She argues that such a perspective “*reinforces and validates the traditional understandings and practices of social work, while challenging the assumptions of the social work profession*” (ibid.)

In the European Journal of Social Work, John Washington defines social work “*as a profession whose area of activity has been located at the interface between the individual and society; between the citizen and the state, between the solidarity process of society and the process of marginalization*”. Throughout its existence social work has focused intervention on the micro levels, incorporating the individual (or group) and his or her environment through “*meeting human needs, and on developing human potential and resources*” (IFSW, 2000: 4). This is achieved by acknowledging that environment plays a key role in the fulfillment of individual needs, and through the protection and promotion of individual and group rights (Reichart, 2003). The International Federation of Social Work¹ formulated the following definition in regard to the professions commitment to social justice and human rights:

“The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising 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” (IFSW²).

Social justice has remained the impetus for social work as a key value in supporting human dignity.

¹ The International Federation of Social Work will forthwith be referred to as IFSW.

² Source: IFSW <http://www.ifsw.org/en/p38000208.html> consulted on 7.01.2007.

With accordance to the International Federation of Social Work - social work is practiced in five contexts:

- *Geographical*: clarifying that all social work practice takes place within a particular set of boundaries such as national, state or regional
- *Political*: social work takes place within a political system of the country in which it is practiced this could be liberal, capitalist, socialists and so forth
- *Socio-economic*: the basic human aspirations such as access to social service and social security and further factors contributing to social cohesion of a group or nation in which social work is practiced
- *Cultural*: Social work practice is to respect the “*practices and beliefs*” (IFSW, 1994:5) of the individuals and groups within the society it is practiced without discrimination of any kind
- *Spiritual*: It is vital that social work practice pays attentions to the values and ethics of its country of practice as well as that of the social workers own value system as no society is value-free.

While human rights encompass '*a more comprehensive set of guidelines for the social work profession*' (Reichert, 2003, p. 7) than social justice, these guidelines are to be understood from a moral perspective and within a broader understanding of notions of social justice.

The connection between social work and human rights:

The concept of human rights as defined by the United Nations, 1987, is as follows:

“Human rights are those rights, which are inherent in our nature and without which we cannot live as human beings. Human rights and fundamental freedoms allow us to fully develop and use our human qualities, our intelligence, our talents and our conscience and to satisfy our spiritual and other needs” (United Nations, 1987, cited in Reichert, 2006:2)

“Human rights” is a term used to summarize globally accepted criteria by which a society may be judged just and humane (O’Byrne, 2003). The overall objective is the achievement of a peaceful world order, and the maximum enjoyment of life for all (*ibid.*).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights consists of 30 different rights and freedoms covering civil, political, economic and cultural issues. The Declaration is not legally binding but functions as an aspiration statement of values and principles, which have been elaborated in various instruments including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and a series of additional multilateral treaties (O’Byrne, 2003). In addition to those documents (developed under the auspices of the United Nations) human rights are enshrined in many countries’ domestic laws and in regional international agreements such as the European Convention on Human Rights, the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights and the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam (*ibid.*).

According to the current legal convention governments or individuals acting on behalf of a government can commit human rights abuses³. Non- profit organisations can be complicit in human rights abuses by aiding or benefiting from a government that commits an abuse (*ibid.*).

Jim Ife, a staunch advocate of human rights and social work from the University of Western Australia, stipulates that the negative rights (such as free speech, freedom of religion) are the rights that require protection (Ife, 2004). The positive rights (such as

³ Companies and non-profit organisations can directly breach national civil and criminal laws.

health care) are those, which are to be realized by active provision on the part of the state or civil society, and these rights that have to be protected by positive action (*ibid.*). The realization of positive rights entails a higher financial investment than negative rights and is thus less popular with governments (*ibid.*). Social work service delivery often entails positive rights, as the services provided aim to realize rights such as healthcare, education, housing and employment. Ife considers emphasizing positive rights a vital step in enabling the development of a strong human rights base for social work delivery agencies (*ibid.*).

Human rights are divided into “*three generations of human rights*” (Ife, 2004:2): (1) civil and political rights; (2) economic, social and cultural rights and (3) collective rights.

“First-generation” human rights located in articles 2 to 21 of the Universal Declaration are essentially concerned with liberty and participation in political life. In general these rights called “negative” human rights, meaning that States have to abstain from taking actions violating these rights. However, this is in fact an oversimplification, since the State has a duty to protect these rights, which requires, on the one hand, a functioning judicial machinery and, on the other, the establishment of laws aimed at protecting a certain right (for example the right to life). This includes also the duty of investigation if a fundamental human right has been violated.

Social workers are most active in the area of “second generation” or economic social and cultural rights including articles 22 to 27 of the Universal Declaration which are fundamentally social, economic, and cultural in nature. They ensure different members of society equal conditions and treatment. These rights include a right to be employed, rights to housing and health care, as well as social security and unemployment benefits.

The “third generation” or collective rights for example the right to development, the right to peace and security the right to a general satisfactory development articulate the achievement of community development. These rights remain largely unofficial and house a broad spectrum of rights, including group and collective rights, the right

to self-determination, the right to economic and social development (Ife, 2001). There are a number of issues concerning uncertainties regarding their holders and duty-bearers.

Some human rights combine individual and collective aspects, for example “*the freedom to manifest religion or belief*” can be exercised either individually or in community with others. The collective rights regulate group rights, for example as in the case of protecting individuals belonging to ethnical minorities. Although the three rights generations are enshrined in separate international instruments, they are perceived holistically and are deemed of equal importance (O’Byrne, 2003).

Human rights are indivisible. It is however possible for human rights to conflict with other rights in which case human rights take precedence over other rights. A special situation occurs when the right or interest colliding with a certain human right is itself a human right. “*The majority of cases involve conflicts between the rights of different persons - for example, Article 4(a) of the UN Convention on the Elimination Of All Forms Of Racial Discrimination obliges the states parties to enact criminal law prohibiting racist hate speech. Hence, the concrete requirements of the right not to be discriminated against on the basis of race enter into conflict with the right to freedom of expression. However, when positive state obligations are involved, it is possible that a conflict arises between different rights of one person. An example of this type of situation is the prohibition on sadomasochistic sexual activities. The individuals involved may claim the right to freedom of sexual expression as a sub-right of the right to protection of private life, whereas the authorities may justify the prohibition of these activities partly on the basis of the states’ obligation to protect citizens against inhuman or degrading treatment*” (Brems, 2005 p. 301)

So what relevance do human rights have for the social work profession?

A human rights-based approach⁴ constitutes a framework of action as well as a methodological tool applied to fulfill the social work profession’s mandate in a reform context (Ife, 2004). This approach is based on the conviction that each and

⁴ Human rights based approach is referred to as a “rights-based approach” (Ife, 2004:20-23).

every human being, by virtue of being human, is a holder of rights. States are called upon to fulfill obligations required to protect and implement human rights. The International Federation of Social Workers policy paper stipulates, “Human Rights are inseparable from social work theory, values and ethics, and practice. Rights corresponding to human needs have to be upheld and fostered, and they embody the justification and motivation for social work action” (International Federation of Social Workers, 2000:5).

Elisabeth Reichert, a lecture on social work policy and practice at the Southern Illinois University, suggests that a likely reason for the lack of motivation by social workers to explore the possibilities offered by human rights for practice can be explained by the misconception that human rights are a remotely relevant legal instrument. Furthermore, human rights often clash with legal and cultural norms when applied by lawyers and take on an air of “*legalistic language*” that is deemed more suitable in a court of law than at the office of the social worker (Reichert, 2006:1). Reichert remains adamant that human rights are relevant to the social work profession through its obligation to advocate for the oppressed, disadvantaged and other vulnerable populations. This, in turn, leads the profession in the direction of a rights-based approach to social work practice.

As I mentioned earlier, putting a rights-based approach into action requires a clear distinction between “rights” and “needs”. A rights-based approach differs from a needs-based approach in that the former recognizes the existence of rights for “rights-holders”⁵ and reinforces capacities of “duty-bearers”⁶ to respect, protect and guarantee these rights that are indivisible, interdependent and interrelated (*ibid.*) Every human being is recognized both as a person and as a right-holder, enabling a life with dignity. In this regard the International Federation stipulates “*The transition from a needs orientation to rights affirmation has taken place*” within the social work profession “*because of tangible substantive needs that have to be met*”. “*A substantive need can be translated into an equivalent positive right, and entitlement to*

⁵ Rights-holders: All human beings, by the mere virtue of being human, are entitled to a life of dignity based on respect for their rights and are thus rights-holders (Margalit, 1996).

⁶ Duty-bearers are those individuals or institutions that are to uphold the specific right related to each UDHR entitlement (O’Byrne, 2003).

the benefits of that right is sought from the State and beyond". A possible distinction between a needs orientation and a rights affirmation: is that an unmet need leads to dissatisfaction. In contrast, a right that is not respected leads to a violation, and its reparation can be legally and legitimately claimed (Ife, 2001).

The main objective of a rights-based approach is to secure the freedom, well-being and dignity of all people.

Social work rests on an integrative system of values, theory and practice, which are in turn based on the principles of human rights and social justice (Ife, 2001). In this sense, a rights-based social work practice is both *descriptive and prescriptive*. The implementation of the human rights discourse as a ground for practice is central to social work and enables a framework to reduce social problems, design social welfare policies and enhance social work practice (*ibid*). Current human rights issues require a broader understanding within the social work profession to transform human rights from the domain of theoretical analysis, into the arena of professional practice and social action (*ibid*). It is precisely because social justice is central to social work's value system that makes it necessary to take rights seriously. It is in this respect that social work's principles of *equality, equity or fairness*, and the just distribution of resources come into play. The notions of social justice and of human rights are inextricably linked. It is vital that the moral and political nature of rights is not overlooked in a bid see the inextricable link between human rights and social justice.

A rights-based social work practice does not only apply to human rights abuses but to the structures and processes within service delivery organisations (*ibid.*) This approach to social work practice requires that individuals have maximum knowledge regarding their choices, and that social workers are ethically compelled to take all reasonable action to facilitate the relevant information sharing.

I wish to introduce the following nine principles postulated by Jim Ife to ensure that social work practice is rights-based (Ife, 2004):

1. Enabling a broad understanding of human rights → this requires that a construction of human rights that includes positive rights be reinforced ensuring the development of a strong human rights base for practice. The perspective of (1) civil and political rights, (2) economic social and cultural rights, and (3) collective rights are required to encapsulate these three generations of human rights, and in doing so, encourage a broader human rights understanding.

2. Human rights are multi-disciplinary and are not to exclusively reserved by a particular discipline or profession *“hence any discipline or profession that is concerned with understanding and affirming humanity is relevant to human rights”* (Ife, 2004: 4).

3. Human rights are constructed and owned by the human community and it is through the interaction with other individuals and groups that human rights are recognized and the corresponding responsibilities met. *“Human rights are collectively constructed and owned”* and are in a sense, *“our rights”* and not *“my rights”* (Ife, 2004:5). *“Human rights are constructions that are derived from the rights of individuals as for example when rights are institutionalised in a constitution”*. In practice, however, the focus is on individual rights (for example in the case of minority rights of women, children and individuals with alternative sexual orientation).

4. Rights and responsibilities involve not only the responsibilities of the individual, but also the responsibilities of the community, the private sector, and the state (*ibid.*). Ife stipulates that it is important to articulate rights and also *“identify the corresponding responsibilities”* (Ife, 2004:6). Ife regards the associated responsibilities as being more problematic than the rights.

5. Human rights can be used as a foundation to engage in cross-cultural dialogue enabling the realization of a common humanity. This encourages an awareness of human rights traditions in different cultures and religions.

6. Identify implicit rights entails identifying the human rights principles that underlie the duties of the social work service delivery. A human rights-based approach differs from the basic needs approach in that it recognizes that rights exist. It also reinforces capacities of duty bearers to respect, protect and guarantee these rights that are indivisible, interdependent and interrelated. In a rights-based approach, every human being is recognized both as a person and as a right-holder. This approach strives to secure the freedom, well-being and dignity of all people within the framework of essential standards and principles, duties and obligations. It further supports mechanisms to ensure that entitlements are attained and safeguarded (Reichert, 2003).

7. Non-violence stipulates that any form of violence is in itself a human rights violation. Violent methods cannot be legitimated in putting an end to acts of violence. Structures and discourses of violence must be challenged in a non-violent way.

8. Problematising professionalism the issue here is not whether the social worker has more knowledge or power but how these resources are put to use – and whether the social work adheres to democratic the principles such as equality, transparency, enabling participation and thus fulfilling the requirements of ethical conduct and practice competence.

9. Applying human rights to the way social workers practice entails being aware that a rights-based practice does not only apply to human rights abuses but to the structures and processes within social work service delivery agencies. This approach to social work practice requires that the individual seeking assistance has maximum knowledge regarding choices and social workers are therefore required to make maximum effort to facilitate such information. Social work practice has a commitment to individuals and communities who are most disadvantaged (Fook, 2002). Ife also asserts that an analysis is required to ensure that programs reach the most marginalized and vulnerable segments of the population (Ife, 2001). Human

rights work takes place at all levels of human interaction as simple respect for the dignity and the humanity of others applying to the way work is carried out and how colleagues, students, administrative staff, and so on are treated. This in turn means there must be consistent conformity between personal and professional, private and public behaviour of advocates of human rights (Ife, 2001).

A way to promote human rights principles is to make sure they are built into all programs and aspects of social work practice. A human rights policy in service delivery is most likely to be effective if it is part of a whole series of policies that promote human rights in every aspect of the organisation's activities. Any separate human rights policy should be set alongside other existing policies in place for employees and must have the backing of staff and management. The aim of a policy is to ensure that all service users receive fair and equal treatment (Ife, 2001).

In conclusion, it seems to me that the key to understanding our role as social workers in a globalised world lies in the promotion of ideas of global citizenship, expressed through an articulation of human rights. Human rights ideals envisage the dismantling of hierarchical systems and represent an encouragement for members of vulnerable populations to challenge domination and oppression. This approach reaches across the entire range of social work practice in any context. My bid here today is that each one of us responds actively to issue of social injustice by advocating for human rights in social work in a quest to embrace diversity and support social cohesion.

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