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SOCIAL WORK IN A SOCIETY UNDER PRESSURE. MAINTAINING PROFESSIONAL PRINCIPLES AND STANDARDS

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on the themes discussed at the 5th Annual International Conference on Social Work & Social Work Education in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands on 5 February 2016. It indicates how social work is embedded in society and describes the pressure of contemporary (inter)national issues on society and how authorities are responding to this. The article continues with a discussion of the answers given by the 200 conference participants on the question how social workers and social work educators could cope with this pressure without denying their international professional principles and standards (IFSW & IASSW, 2004a,b, 2014).

VITAL SERVICE

Social work is a vital service for vulnerable groups in society, and for people in need. It can be a blessing for those who are unable, for whatever reasons, to cope with everyday life and participate fully in society. Social workers help people get back on track. Social work is about hope, connection, choices, well-being and balance in human life. For this reason, the availability of a modern, advanced system of social work can be considered a sign, or a characteristic, of a civilised society: a society that values respect for others, social justice, diversity and human rights.

GLOBAL PROFESSION

Social workers can be found all over the world. They have a professional identity, share an international body of knowledge, are bound by professional ethics, and are educated according to certain standards. These professional components are developed, secured and promoted at the global level by dedicated international organizations for social work. The most important of these are the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW). Like many other professions, social work is very much an international profession (Blok, 2012a).

NATIONAL CONDITIONS

The accelerating process of globalization is creating a growing awareness of the international character of social developments, social problems, and the social policies that social work forms a part of and is confronted with. Since all social workers are financed, organized and educated by individual nation states, tensions quite often occur between their international identities and standards on the one hand and nationally based social-political demands on the other.

Let us take the Netherlands, for example, where social workers have been facing increasingly neoliberal social policies since the 1990s, as well as the decentralization of operations that occurred in 2007. Because these developments have been coupled with budget reductions, the implementation of market mechanisms, and the inclusion of informal networks, they have had a strong impact on the position, role and tasks of social workers. In our opinion, the most worrying example of this is the limitation of the social worker's professional autonomy to decide what is necessary or best for their clients. This still takes place in our social institutions today, despite some enlightening examples to the contrary.

In this respect we are glad that the professional identity, ethics and educational standards of social work are beyond the reach of national governments, and are maintained and safeguarded by professional organizations for social workers at the international level.

INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION

The development of modern, professional social work has been subject to international influences since its inception in the 1890s. This is reflected by the international body of knowledge on social work, and the long existence (since 1928) of its three major professional organizations: the IFSW, the IASSW and the ICSW. These international organizations are important as guardians of social work's professional identity, and the principles and standards of social work and social work education. In addition, these organizations give a voice to social workers, facilitate exchange, stimulate cooperation and mutual support, promote the profession at international bodies (the UN, EU etc.) and lobby for appropriate social policies (Truell, during NHL Presentations 2016). Due to the ongoing process of globalization, a further increase in their influence and importance is likely. As such, it was fairly surprising for the participants at the 5th international conference to hear that the Dutch association of social workers is not a member of the IFSW!

EMBEDDING SOCIAL WORK IN SOCIETY

Due to their position and functions in society, social workers directly experience the increasing pressure in and on their countries as a result of the growing magnitude of national and international issues of an economic, political, social, cultural, and religious nature, as well as the way authorities respond to these issues.

For a clear basic understanding, Willem Blok has drawn up the following overview (Figure 1) of the embedding of social work in society (Blok, 2012b, pp. 147–148). For his lecture at the 5th International Conference in Leeuwarden he added the historical powers of change in the left upper corner, a listing of contemporary major problems in the right upper corner, and the two notes at the bottom.

We live in an era of rapid social developments. These developments are driven by the four drivers of change: technology, economy, ideology & religion, and social conflicts & movements. These
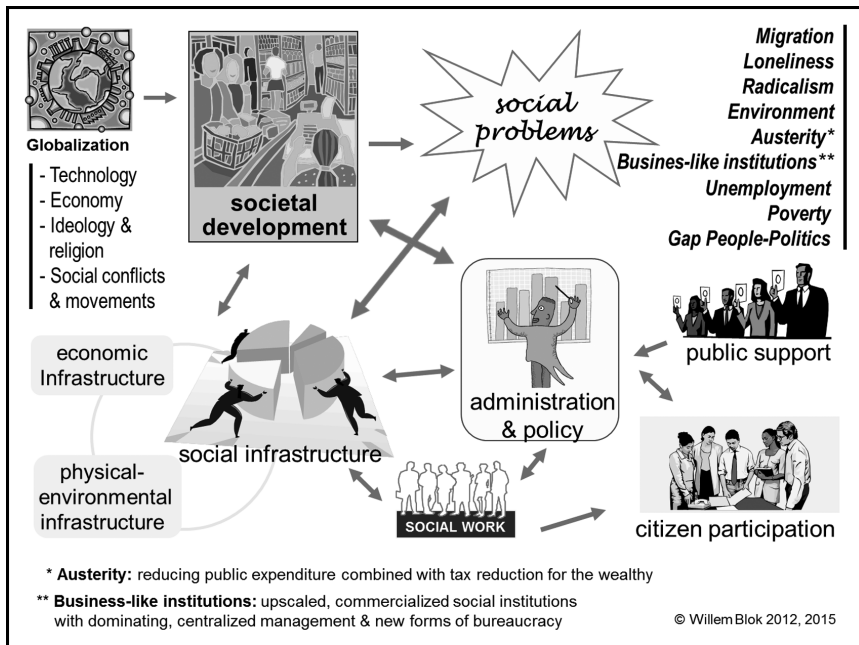
Figure 1: The embedding of social work in society

drivers have a global impact. Wilson (2012, p. 16) offers a useful, generalized description of globalization as "a growing interconnectedness and integration of economies across national borders, through the movement of capital, goods, services and technology, and also involving the diffusion of social, cultural and political ideas".

The influence of globalization is being felt and is visible in each of the three sectors of every country in the world: the economic infrastructure, the physical environmental infrastructure (buildings, roads, communication etc.) and the social infrastructure. The various institutions that make up social infrastructure (education, health care, social work, sports, recreation etc.) are adjusting to societal developments in order to manage, reduce and solve its negative effects and social problems.

This social infrastructure is overseen by the social policy of national governments, and depends on the money that those governments are willing to spend on this, as well as on public support for

such spending. Social work forms part of this social infrastructure. It fulfils a variety of tasks and roles. In a democratic society, policy development and public expenditure are or should be subject to public debate, participation and support. By promoting the empowerment and participation of citizens, as well as appropriate social policies, social work contributes to the democratic policy process and decision-making in society.

Social workers provide their services in a range of social conditions. They depend on proper education, on the social institutions for which they work, and on the social policy of national and local governments. This means that the organization, position and tasks of social workers very much depend on national social policy. This affects the freedom of action of social work and its legitimation, while the whole of the conditions affects the results they achieve. To a certain extent, the socio-economic and political influence on social work is inevitable, because the profession is embedded in society and social workers are the product of the times they live in. But this does not mean that social work is a passive plaything that can be used for any political purpose. Like all other professions, social work has its own moral framework and reason for existence, which must be preserved and defended if necessary.

VARIABLES AND CONSTANTS IN DEFINING SOCIAL WORK

According to the IFSW's secretary-general Rory Truell speaking at the 5th international conference (NHL Presentations, 2016), social work has undergone various ups and downs throughout its history and development, with district-oriented work, activating, and empowerment being recurring themes. The global definition of social work has been amended several times since 1957, following the changing socio-economic and political climate in the world. The first definition, which dates from 1957, focuses on helping individuals and groups adapt better to society. In 1982 the focus was shifted to societal change rather than individual development. This was the result of an ongoing debate among social workers on this theme. Also at the conference, Mark Garavan illustrated this point by asking the question: "If we have social problems, are the individuals the source of these, or is it the social structure?" (NHL Presentations, 2016). The third global definition of social work, formulated in 2000, included two underlying principles: human rights and social justice. In 2014 this was supplemented by collective responsibility and respect for diversity. Although these two additions are related to human rights and social justice, explicitly mentioning them more accurately reflects current demands. Despite these amendments, the core of the global definition of social work has remained constant: supporting individuals and groups, and contributing to societal change on the basis of underlying principles.

PRINCIPLES AND STANDARDS IN SOCIAL WORK

Social workers handle numerous social problems and work with individuals and groups of various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Social work has a purpose, is goal-oriented, supports various groups and persons, and operates in different fields on the basis of specific activities and methods. None of the various forms of professional action can be viewed separately from normative choices and the personality of the individual worker. Professional action is always carried out within a meaningful, sensitive context, in collaboration with others (clients, colleagues and customers) and is based on the ethical code of the worker's profession (Blok, 2012b, p. 129). It is important to emphasize this. Without professional principles and standards, we would not talk about "social workers", but about "social robots".

At the 5th International Conference in Leeuwarden, the awareness of the core values of social work was considered essential to safeguard the core of the profession in this era of rapid social developments. This is the only way to respond to the political issues of the day, in which social work is sometimes used as a pawn on the social chessboard. Margot Trappenburg cast a critical eye over this, drawing on the so-called "circle of going along":

> In the outer ring we find the general cultural mood of the day in current society. In the second ring we find the logic of economics and self-interest or self-preservation. In the inner circle we find social workers' own ideology. All three rings contribute to the urge to go along with pro-posed changes. (NHL Presentations, 2016)

According to Trappenburg, "going along" with changes is not a necessity. Changes in the social domain are "no physical phenomena but human choices" with advantages and disadvantages. Going along with them is only one of the possibilities.

CORE VALUES IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Questioning the urge to go along with changes in policy and practice is, in our opinion, also advisable for social work education. In the Netherlands, education is almost constantly subjected to one set of reforms or another, and these are too often based on principles other than social work principles. Neoliberal ideas such as marketization, consumerism, and managerialism (Harris, 2003) have also taken a foothold in education since the start of the new millennium. Instead of this

market ideology, a strong profile of the core values of social work should guide the way in which the social work curriculum is designed and updated.

The main question in the conference workshop held by Mark Garavan and Jeannette Hartman ("Professional Principles & Standards: Challenges in Dutch and Irish Social Work Education") was whether and how the curricula in these two countries reflect the core values (i.e. the principles and standards) of social work and how these are propagated by teachers. All participants took the view that this is not the case. According to the participants, the emphasis in education is on the development of individuals and groups, not on the societal responsibility of social workers. Many teachers seem to prefer a value-neutral position in their teaching regarding societal responsibility. That is a pity, because teaching on the basis of an explicit vision encourages students to think about values and encourages them to enter into a dialogue.

In the conference workshop by Reynaert and Nachtergaele ("Social work as Keeper of Human Rights"), the participants discussed the premise that social workers are agents of human rights and advocates for human dignity and social justice in society. The conclusion of the discussion was a positive one. Social workers enter the life world of people, and are therefore able to signal injustice and hold policy makers accountable for their responsibilities. As a result of this workshop, a Flemish-Dutch network of lecturers from several universities of applied science was established, with the aim of developing and implementing a Human Rights approach in social work education.

FINAL REMARKS

Because social work is part of the social infrastructure of society, current developments in the field of (inter)national social policy have consequences for the position, role and tasks of social workers, and (can) establish new requirements for social work education. In this respect Toby Witte (2015) emphasizes the need for thoughtful guidance, taking into account the core values of social work. Boutellier and Jansen (2014, p. 9) also argue for the need to respect the core function of social work: "working on the social quality of our society".

We agree with Trappenburg's thesis that simply going along with changes is not inevitable but represents a choice, and as such it should be based on a process of critical reflection. Whether and how socio-political developments should be translated into curricula should be the subject of a

careful values-based analysis. Because the value core of social work is formed by the principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversity, we are certain that there will be sufficient room for regional and national differences and, if necessary, for changes in the practice of social work to accommodate socio-political developments in society.

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