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## Defining Social Work for the 21st Century : The International Federation of Social Workers' Revised Definition of Social Work

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## Defining social work for the 21st century

### The International Federation of Social Workers' revised definition of social work

● Isadora Hare

At its biennial general meeting held in Montreal in July 2000, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) agreed on a new international definition of social work, replacing a previous version from 1982. At the same time, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) also adopted this definition at its General Assembly. Subsequently, at the IASSW–IFSW meeting in Copenhagen in June 2001, both organizations agreed to formally adopt it as the joint international definition. Written in English, the definition has now been translated into 15 languages (IFSW, 2002).

This initiative was begun in 1994 under the leadership of Elis Envall, a Swedish social worker, who was president of IFSW at that time. Cognizant of the major world changes that had occurred since 1982 – technologically, economically, politically and culturally – and that social work itself had proliferated across the globe, he believed that the profession needed to define the parameters of its practice and its values and knowledge base, thereby equipping it to participate more fully in international affairs (Envall, 2000: 4).

The phenomenon of globalization served as the backdrop to the initiative (Ellwood, 2001; Langmore, 1998; Midgley, 1993, 1997a, 2000b). Globalization is a complex concept, most often associated

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with economic trends which have developed and accelerated over the last 25 years. Midgley has defined globalization as 'a process of global integration in which diverse peoples, economies, cultures, and political processes are increasingly subjected to international influences' (1997a: xi). Economics is therefore but one aspect of globalization which also has social, demographic, political and cultural dimensions. Within this complex network of factors, social work has many roles to play. Foremost among these is the promotion of social development (Bose, 1992). The contemporary social development perspective focuses on the integration of economic and social policy. According to Midgley, 'economic development should be inclusive, integrated and sustainable and bring benefits to all; and secondly . . . social welfare should be investment oriented, seeking to enhance human capacities to participate in the productive economy' (Midgley, 2000a: 24).

Certainly, social workers are currently practicing in an extremely complex world. They need to understand the forces of globalization – economic, ecological and social – to connect with their international colleagues, and to represent themselves in an informed fashion in international circles. This applies whether they are delivering direct services to immigrants, refugees (Mupedziswa, 1997) or those displaced and traumatized by famine, war, terrorism or natural disasters, or whether they are participating in international policy-making or planning organizations (Ife, 2000: 62–3). The consciousness of such demands on the profession, both present and future, served as the context within which IFSW resolved to formulate a new definition of social work for the 21st century.

In the words of Malcolm Payne (1996: 172): 'We need a changed conception of social work which represents effectively the whole range of its knowledge and skills throughout the world . . . [This will facilitate shared discourse derived] from a shared conception that organized social action and intervention are worthwhile for related social purposes.'

### **The process of formulating the definition**

The diversity of social work organizations affiliated with IFSW and the range of social work practices they represent required that the process of writing the definition be as carefully considered as the final product. The project was initiated at the IFSW biennial general meeting held in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1994. Two years later the IFSW president, Elis Envall, appointed a special task force consist-

ing of one representative from each of the five IFSW regions: Africa, Asia and the Pacific (including Australia and New Zealand), Europe, Latin America and North America. Five additional people served as representatives of other organizations or as special resource persons, and the input of various leaders of the profession worldwide was also solicited.

The process began with an extensive review of the literature, including academic analyses, licensure laws and regulations, codes of ethics and documents prepared specifically for the task force (Hall, 1997; Tan, 1997). Throughout the next four years, numerous discussions were held at regional and general meetings of the federation across the globe. At the international conference held in Jerusalem in July 1998, a consultation day was held to solicit direct contributions from numerous IFSW member associations and individuals, and all member associations had opportunities to comment on various drafts of the document.

### **The new definition**

The final version of the definition adopted in Montreal (see Appendix) is a one-page document. It begins with a short definition, followed by a commentary of four paragraphs: the first expands on the definition itself, and the remaining three focus respectively on the values, theory and practice of social work.

The core definition reads as follows.

The social work profession promotes social change, problem-solving in human relationships, and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing theories of human behavior 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.

The rationale for selecting the core concepts and terminology will now be explicated.

At this stage of its professional evolution across the globe, there are wide variations in social work practice, from clinical social work, sometimes in private practice settings, to community organization, social policy and planning, and social development. Initially some doubted whether these apparently divergent methodologies could be reconciled in one rubric. What emerged however was the core concept of person-in-environment. The task force and the member associations ultimately agreed that the central organizing and unifying concept of social work universally was intervention

at the interface of human beings and their environments, both physical and social, thereby reaffirming the thinking of previous social work theorists. In certain settings or methods, the social worker focuses more on intervening with a person or persons and somewhat less on the environment, while in other settings the focus is on the environment and its impact on the way people live in society. In all cases, however, social workers adopt this holistic view (Ramsay, 1999), concentrating on the multiple, reverberating transactions between people and their environments. This is a complex concept, since effects are bi-directional. People are affected by their environments – whether a polluted river, repressive social policies, a school or children's institution, the workplace or a family – and people also have the capacity to change their environments. Indeed, empowering them to do so is also part of social work. This range of interventions is depicted as a continuum in Figure 1.

Another core concept is enhancing human well-being. As the Preamble to the USA's National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (1996) states: the primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being (Reamer, 1998: 263). A UNESCO publication has defined well-being as:

a state of successful performance throughout the life course integrating physical, cognitive, and social-emotional function that results in productive activities deemed significant by one's cultural community, fulfilling social relationships, and the ability to transcend moderate psychosocial and environmental problems. Well-being also has a subjective dimension in the sense of satisfaction associated with fulfilling one's potential. (Pollard and Davidson, 2001: 10–11)

## The social work profession

Whether social work can be considered a fully-developed profession or remains a semi-profession has been debated throughout the last century (Toren, 1972; Greenwood, 1957; Hall, 1968; Hopps and Collins, 1995: 2266). Currently there are also those who consider that social work is a group of professions rather than a unitary entity. Indeed, the *European Journal of Social Work* refers to 'the social professions' (Otto and Lorenz, 1999: 1–2), embracing both social workers and social pedagogues, whose organizations are included in IFSW membership. North American social workers know little about social pedagogy and associated professionals such as social or cultural animators, and have conceptual as well as linguistic difficulties in grasping the relationship between these

professions and social work as they understand it. The differences of opinion on the task force in this regard were resolved by beginning the definition with the words 'the social work profession', which social pedagogues accepted as an umbrella concept.

### **Social work activities**

The task force decided early in its deliberations that the definition should address what the profession actually does in a very active sense. The definition therefore begins with the sentence: 'The social work profession promotes social change [and] problem-solving in human relationships . . .'

As is well-known, social work originated from two separate but related developments in the latter half of the 19th century, first in England and later in the USA: the charity organization society, whose 'friendly visiting' was the forerunner to social casework; and the Settlement House movement begun in London at Toynbee Hall by Samuel and Henrietta Barnett in 1885 and transplanted to the USA by Jane Addams, who established Hull House in Chicago, and in 1931 won the Nobel peace prize. Addams and Hull House came to represent the social action and reform branch of the profession (Kendall, 2000: 100; Specht and Courtney, 1994: 73–85; Hopps and Collins, 1995: 2266; Quam, 1995: 2571–2).

These two components have continued to characterize the profession. In general, the direct or 'clinical' services provided to individuals, families and small groups have been dominant. However, the other component, variously described as community work, social and political action, and policy practice (Iatridis, 1995: 1855–66; Fung, 1996: 139; Jansson, 1994; Haynes and Mickelson, 1991; Wyers, 1991) in some contexts, and social development in others (Midgley, 1997b; Dominelli, 1997: 75, 81; Mahaffey and Hanks, 1982), has persisted and gained in significance (Talyigas and Hegyesi, 1992).

With these factors as background, the task force selected promoting social change as social work's primary activity. This can be interpreted as changing relationships between individuals and small groups, as well as within social institutions. References to social workers as change agents are found frequently in the social work literature (Shaefor et al., 1997: 67; Pincus and Minahan, 1973: 33; Tan and Envall, 2000: 5).

Problem-solving in human relationships follows the concept of social change. In 1957, Helen Harris Perlman of the University

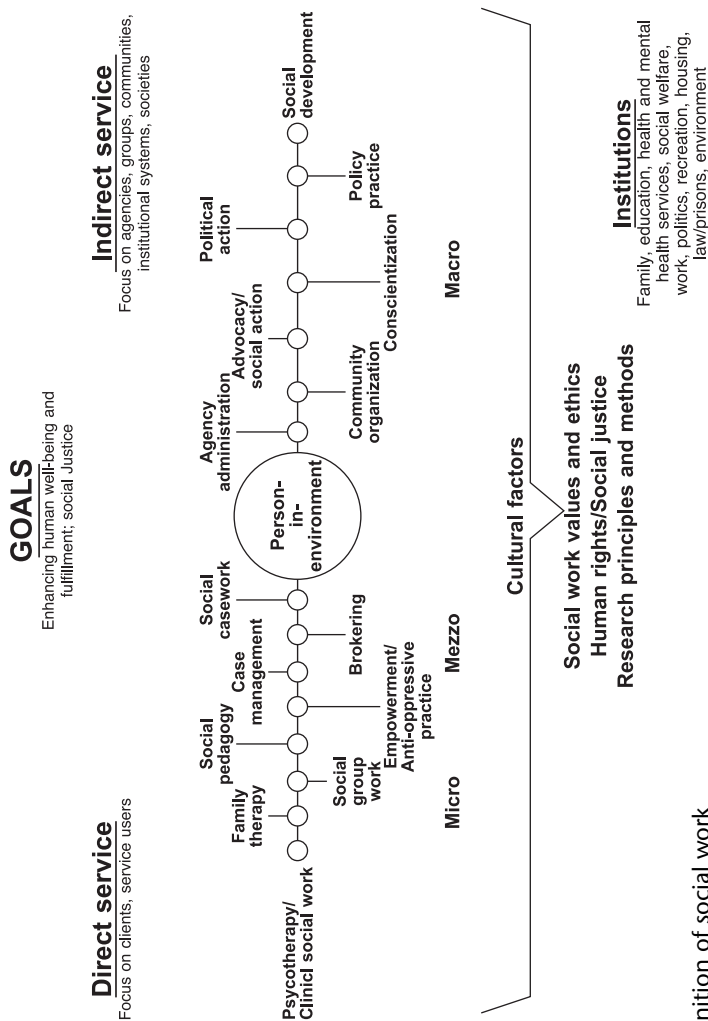


Figure 1 Definition of social work



of Chicago published her seminal text entitled *Social Casework: A Problem-Solving Process*. For her, casework and problem-solving were synonymous. Compton and Galaway (1979) also used problem-solving as a model for social work practice, which they later (1994) developed with an emphasis on intervention that went beyond Perlman's focus on processes (Payne, 1996: 41). The definition connects problem-solving specifically to human relationships. In this way, it refers to the central role of relationships in human life, whether one-to-one relationships between intimate partners, family members, friends or co-workers, or larger-scale relationships between groups such as racial, ethnic, gender or religious, or even whole societies. This phrase is intended to include the therapeutic activities performed by clinical social workers or caseworkers, as well as macro-level practice. Thus, the first two phrases in the definition refer to the interventions social work provides to human beings as they interact with their human, societal and physical environments, whether on an interpersonal level or in a broader social context, constantly reflecting the person-in-environment construct.

Promoting the empowerment and liberation of people are important social work processes, both in newly-industrializing countries and in more developed societies (Evans, 1992). Since its inception, social work has been particularly concerned with people who are poor, vulnerable and oppressed, as well as those who are coping with the problems and vicissitudes of living. The goal of empowering people to handle their lives more effectively has in recent times become more prominent in social work thinking. For example, Sewpaul emphasizes empowerment strategies in the reconstruction and development programs in South Africa since its liberation from apartheid (1997: 5).

There are many definitions of empowerment (Leadbetter, 2002: 201; Rondeau, 2000: 218; Kemp, 1995: 188). Shaefer et al. (1997: 504) quote a useful definition by Lorraine Gutierrez (1990): 'Empowerment is the process of increasing personal, interpersonal or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations. It is a means of addressing the problems of powerless populations and the role powerlessness plays in creating and perpetuating social problems in both developing and developed societies' (Gutierrez et al., 1995: 249–50; Gutierrez, 1995).

The concepts of empowerment and liberation have been greatly influenced by the theories of Paulo Freire, the famous Brazilian educator (1921–97). Freire emphasized the process of conscientiza-

tion, which 'refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality' (Freire, 2001/1970: 35). This represents a 'critical consciousness', which enables people to reflect on their everyday experience not just in personal terms, but also with the awareness of the social and political environments which influence that experience. According to Freire, this empowers people to take action to overcome oppressive social conditions (Kemp et al., 1997: 57).

Many social work writers have emphasized the importance of Freire's work for social workers internationally (Payne, 1996: 165–6; Johannesen, 1997, 151–2; Narayan, 2000: 193). For example, he exerted a strong influence on social work in Chile and other countries in Latin America (Jimenez and Aylwin, 1992: 32); and Rwomire and Raditlhokwa (1996) utilize Freire's concepts in their advocacy of a radical definition of social work in Africa.

### **Utilizing theories of human behavior and social systems**

One of the criteria for professional status is the possession and utilization of a specialized knowledge base organized into a body of theory (Greenwood, 1957: 46; Bartlett, 1970: 63). Since person-in-environment was selected as the core concept in social work, the task force emphasized theories of human behavior and social systems. Both these bodies of theory encompass knowledge from many sciences, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, law, medicine, psychiatry and economics. From these, social workers select those aspects that are relevant to their practice in multiple settings. Theories of human behavior include the psychodynamic, the cognitive-behavioral, person-centered theory, crisis theory and others (Shaefor et al., 1997: 100–6).

In view of social work's holistic approach to person-in-environment, social systems theory is also critical in comprehending the complexities of situations requiring intervention. General systems theory is defined by Carol Meyer (1995: 19, 21) as a 'general science of wholeness that describes sets of elements standing in interaction, or the systemic interconnectedness of variables such as people and their environments . . . systems thinking is intended to accommodate multiplicity, complexity, and uncertainty . . . [it] is about wholeness, the search for the integration of parts and the processes of interaction'.

General systems theory is often linked with the concept of ecology to form the ecosystems perspective in social work. Ecology, a concept drawn from biology, is the science of organism–environment relations. It leads to a view of person and environment as a unitary, interacting system in which each constantly affects the other as they strive to attain a dynamic equilibrium. This perspective enables the practitioner ‘to comprehend complexity and avoid oversimplification and reductionism’ (Meyer, 1995: 19). In the words of Mattaini (1995): ‘The social work practitioner needs to see and know everything at the same time . . . adequate assessment in social work requires “thinking big” – seeing the full transactional situation all at once. The practice setting, the field of practice, the behavioral roots of the problem, and the larger socio-cultural factors are among the numerous facets of every case.’

#### *The commentary on theory*

The commentary on theory in the definition document introduces three important ideas: evidence-based knowledge; indigenous knowledge; and bio-psychosocial factors.

*The concept of evidence-based knowledge* This originated in medical education in Canada, and is now a key criterion for methodologies utilized by physicians, psychologists (Hoagwood et al., 2001; Hoagwood, 2002) and social workers. As Witkin and Harrison (2001: 296) state: ‘Evidence-based practice envisions a scientifically based social work that uses the best available evidence to guide practice decisions . . . [however, an uncritical adoption of this approach] may lead to social work’s losing its traditional emphasis on understanding people in context and understanding that individual problems and social problems are inseparable.’

Debate on the most appropriate approach to evidence in social work is continuing in the United Kingdom, Europe and the USA (Webb, 2001; Gambrill, 1999, 2001).

*The term ‘indigenous knowledge’* This refers to the critical importance of shaping social work to suit economic and cultural realities, particularly in developing countries. Indigenization implies ‘adapting imported ideas to fit local needs’ (Hall, 1990: 9), and modifying social work roles to become appropriate to the needs of different countries (Hall, 1990, quoting Midgley, 1981; Kaseke, 1996; Rao, 1996). For example, American practitioners must develop cultural competence in serving first-nation clients (Weaver, 1999) and

others in its diverse society; and in contemporary China indigenization means considering traditional Chinese culture, the impact of the market economy on people, and the impact of collectivism and 'welfarism' on people's mentality and on helping behavior (Yuen-Tsang, 2002: 384-5).

*Bio-psychosocial factors* Adding the biological to the psychosocial factors inherent in social work assessment recognizes its profound influence on humanity, for example, the impact of the AIDS pandemic (UNAIDS, 2002) and other chronic diseases, hunger, injury and environmental pollution. Given such advances as deciphering the human genome, stem cell research, organ transplantation and reproductive technology, social workers must have the knowledge to participate in client decision-making and ethical debates occasioned by these developments.

### **Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work**

The United Nations has described human rights as those rights which are inherent in our nature and without which we cannot live as human beings (United Nations Centre for Human Rights, 1994: 4). IFSW, echoing this statement, has affirmed that: 'Social work has, from its conception, been a human rights profession, having as its basic tenet the intrinsic value of every human being and as one of its main aims the promotion of equitable social structures, which can offer people security and development while upholding their dignity' (IFSW, 1996; United Nations Centre for Human Rights, 1994: 3).

Social work has always concerned itself with people's rights to the satisfaction of their basic needs for food, water, shelter and health care, and is committed to upholding and fostering such rights, which 'embody the justification and motivation for social work action' (ibid., 5). The profession's focus on meeting common human needs, including particularly the needs of vulnerable and oppressed people, involves upholding social justice, defined as 'an ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits' (Reamer, 1998: 8, quoting Barker, 1995: 354). Ife has explored these concepts in detail (2001).

Social workers across the world have used the motivation of social justice to engage in social action, sometimes facing imprisonment for

their activities in countries with authoritarian regimes. For example, many social workers played active roles in the liberation struggle against apartheid in South Africa. These include Winnie Mandela, Helen Joseph, Maxine Hart (Suttner, 1997: 519), Ellen Kuzwayo (1985) and Leila Patel (1992).

Two other concepts related to social justice are solidarity and social inclusion.

Solidarity implies 'not only understanding and empathy towards humankind's pain and suffering, but also identifying and taking a stand with the sufferers and their cause, . . . expressing their solidarity in words and deeds in the face of any form of denial of people's political, civil, social, economic, cultural, or spiritual rights' (United Nations Centre for Human Rights, 1994: 60).

Leontina Kanyowa (1999) of Zimbabwe, quoting Appasamy et al. (1996) on social exclusion in India, defines social exclusion as 'a process which restricts the access of certain social groups to valued resources and entitlements, relegating them to the status of social outsiders' (Kanyowa, 1999: 60). This concept featured at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995. However, the developing countries of the global South are themselves excluded from the global community because of mass poverty, and the term remains controversial (Ife, 1999).

## Conclusion

In the world of the 21st century, challenged by globalization and a widening gap between rich and poor (Annan, 2001: 8), social work, with its holistic focus on the complexities of people interacting with their environments, has much to offer. However, social workers worldwide must learn more about the global forces affecting societies in various stages of economic development. They must broaden their conceptions of social work's potential contributions to contemporary issues and problems, accepting that social work – with its common nucleus – encompasses a wide range of methodologies, from clinical interventions with individuals, families and small groups, to community-based interventions, policy practice and social development.

The IFSW has through this revised definition of social work captured the core and compass of contemporary social work, its values, knowledge base and practice methodologies. Hopefully this will encourage social workers across the globe to expand their vision

of their profession and to engage with colleagues in furthering international activities through their associations at national and international levels. The new definition will also facilitate IFSW's participation in the work of other international bodies such as the UN and its agencies.

It must be remembered, however, that social work in the 21st century is dynamic and evolving. Therefore, neither this definition, nor any other, should be regarded as exhaustive or as the final word.

## Appendix

Members of the Task Force included:

Elis Envall, President of IFSW, Sweden  
 Isadora Hare, USA, Task Force Coordinator  
 Nigel Hall, Zimbabwe, Vice-president for Africa  
 Ngoh-Tiong Tan, Singapore, Vice-president for Asia and Pacific  
 Kirsten Nissen, Denmark  
 Juan Manuel Latorre Carvajal, Colombia, Vice-president for Latin America and the Caribbean  
 Eila Malmstrom, Finland  
 Lena Dominelli, UK, President of IASSW  
 Resource persons: Eilis Walsh, Ireland; Ellen Apostol, Switzerland;  
 Lowell Jenkins, USA  
 Tom Johannesen, Secretary-General of IFSW, ex officio.

## International Federation of Social Workers' definition of social work

(Adopted by the IFSW General Meeting, 26 July 2000, Montreal, Canada)

### *Definition\**

The social work profession promotes social change, problem-solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing theories of human behavior 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.

*Commentary*

Social work in its various forms addresses the multiple, complex transactions between people and their environments. Its mission is to enable all people to develop their full potential, enrich their lives and prevent dysfunction. Professional social work is focused on problem-solving and change. As such, social workers are change agents in society and in the lives of the individuals, families and the communities they serve. Social work is an interrelated system of values, theory and practice.

*Values*

Social work grew out of humanitarian and democratic ideas, and its values are based on respect for the equality, worth and dignity of all people. Since its beginnings over a century ago, social work practice has focused on meeting human needs and developing human potential. Human rights and social justice serve as the motivation and justification for social work action. In solidarity with those who are disadvantaged, the profession strives to alleviate poverty and to liberate vulnerable and oppressed people in order to promote social inclusion. Social work values are embodied in the profession's national and international codes of ethics.

*Theory*

Social work bases its methodology on a systematic body of evidence-based knowledge derived from research and practice evaluation, including local and indigenous knowledge specific to its context. It recognizes the complexity of interactions between human beings and their environment, and the capacity of people both to be affected by and to alter the multiple influences upon them, including bio-psychosocial factors. The social work profession draws on theories of human development and behavior and social systems to analyze complex situations and to facilitate individual, organizational, social and cultural changes.

*Practice*

Social work addresses the barriers, inequities and injustices that exist in society. It responds to crises and emergencies as well as to everyday personal and social problems. Social work utilizes a variety of skills, techniques and activities consistent with its holistic focus on persons and their environments. Social work interventions range

from primarily person-focused psychosocial processes to involvement in social policy, planning and development. These include counseling, clinical social work, group work, social pedagogical work, and family treatment and therapy, as well as efforts to help people obtain services and resources in the community. Interventions also include agency administration, community organization and engaging in social and political action to impact social policy and economic development.

\* This international definition of the social work profession replaces the IFSW definition adopted in 1982. It is understood that social work in the 21st century is dynamic and evolving, and therefore no definition should be regarded as exhaustive.

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