Globalisation of consciousness and new challenges for international social work

Ahmadi N. Globalisation of consciousness and new challenges for international social work

Although the notion of international social work is not new, it is only in recent times that its central premises have been in focus. Considering diverse ongoing globalisation processes and in regard to the weakening of the national welfare state, social work must tackle the challenge of redefining its role and mission if it is to remain true to its professional commitments. The emergence of new global regions and the globalisation of local social problems make the consolidation of democracy and human rights, the prevention of conflicts and the promotion of solidarity and peace through global cultural integration some of the main concerns of international social work. In this article, international social work is discussed as a project of partnership between diverse social actors such as practitioners, universities and local governments cooperating beyond the boundaries of the nation-state.

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Introduction

This article has two purposes: the first is to argue for the necessity of developing international social work in the context of postmodernism and the globalisation of consciousness; the second is to bring into focus some of the characteristics of international social work. In the pursuit of these objectives, the article explores the implications for social work of increasing social globalisation and of the ongoing erosion of the political, economic and ideological conditions from which the modern welfare state has emerged. One conclusion is that in the same way that politics and economics have transcended their national boundaries, so too should welfare policy and social work practice transcend their national and cultural boundaries.

One of the basic ideas maintained in this article is that consciousness is rapidly being globalised. The social manifestation of this global consciousness is the possible harmonisation of life ideals in different parts of the world. In this event, a possible consequence is that people in different parts of the world strive for similar goals and life ideals and are thus confronted with similar problems. Be that as it may, not only does the globalisation of consciousness lead to similar patterns of exposure to problems, but it also opens up for the promotion of global solidarity, democracy and a greater possibility to prevent conflicts. This implies new tasks and new challenges for social workers if they are to continue to have an effect on emerging postmodern global societies.

International social work can and should play an important role in consolidating democracy, social justice and the implementation of international conventions such as human rights, elimination of discrimination against women, rights of children and so on, as well as preventing conflicts and supporting peace by promoting global cultural integration. International social work can also be highly educative and practical. By studying and becoming involved in the practice of social work in other countries, international social workers are in a position to observe how the social politics of these countries work in reality and to learn from the experiences of others how to adapt these practices to national and international laws.

With reference to the weakening and inevitable transformation of the welfare state as a consequence of globalisation, this article aims to stress new possibilities and new roles for international social work. In this respect, international social work is discussed as a project of partnership between diverse social actors such as practitioners, universities and local governments cooperating beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. Stressing that the purpose of international social work should be to engage in joint endeavours to solve common problems that have emerged as a consequence of the globalisation of consciousness and the weakening of the national welfare, the article promotes the ideas of inter-regionality and the involvement of new social actors, such as universities, in the field of international social work.
Background

Globalisation and the consolidation of postmodernity leave no nation unaffected by the international impact of economic, political and social problems. The term postmodern refers in this article to a set of conditions and thus signifies both a state of mind and a state of affairs rather than a historical period succeeding the modern era (Bauman, 1992; Harvey, 1990; Lash, 1990; Smart, 1993; Turner, 1990; Vattimo, 1992). As a consequence of the diminishing importance of geographical constraints, forces beyond national economics and politics have a direct impact on people’s living standards and ideals. It is now considered common knowledge that the globalisation of the economy and international finance has brought about the almost total destruction of spatial constraints for the movement of capital (Bauman, 1998; Bell, 1974). However, the consequences of de-territorialisation are not confined only to the domain of economics. As Antonin Wagner so aptly points out: ‘The process of economic globalisation has been affecting social cohesion within societies in many parts of the world. In a global economy social problems at the local level may be caused in part by economic changes occurring far away’ (1997: 45). Crow goes even further and questions the conventional definition of society: ‘It can no longer be assumed that people sharing a particular geographical space will also have the common social ties and culture by which a “society” has conventionally been defined’ (1997: 10). Thus, it is not an exaggeration to assert that today many of the issues that have until now been the target of national social welfare policies and local social work practices extend beyond the borders of the nation-state and have global effects.

International migration makes poverty, political and religious oppression, and the lack of civil rights in one society the concern of other societies. Woman trafficking and sex tourism make the sexual exploitation of women and children in one part of the world the moral, legal and public-health concern of other parts. Low wages, harsh work conditions and the exploitation of an under-age work force in one country affect national employment policies and labour markets in other countries. In conclusion, the economic and political globalisation of the world implies also a globalisation of social problems, which in turn actualises the need for social welfare policy and practice to devise appropriate programmes and viable models for social work practice and training. Besides the effects of globalisation, the emergence and consolidation of postmodernity requires a total re-conceptualisation of existing social concepts and, hence, social work methods.

It is important to note in this context that in recent years new actors have joined the field of international social work. Besides government agencies and NGOs and humanitarian organisations such as UNICEF, UNDP, the International Red Cross and so on, many universities and institutions of education have become engaged in carrying out international social work projects as well, among them Stockholm University. The International Projects Division of the Department of Social Work at Stockholm University has been involved in a number of international social service projects in Bosnia & Herzegovina, the Baltic countries, Russia, Belarus, Armenia, China and Vietnam during the last decade.

Involvement of new actors and the fact that international social work projects extend over quite different areas (from purely foreign-aid-based development projects to purely educational and/or research projects) indicate that the practice of social work has now reached new dimensions which require corresponding adaptation in the theories of social work. Although the term international social work was first coined in 1943 (Hokenstad, Khinduka & Midgley, 1992: 4) there is no consensus among the theoreticians of social work about its implication. Different scholars have employed this term diversely to refer to a wide variety of activities. For instance, many textbooks on international social work put their main focus on comparative social work with the intention of presenting the variety of social work models that are being applied in different countries. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that in the last two decades a firm theoretical foundation for international social work has been established (Hessle, 2000; Hokenstad, Khinduka & Midgley, 1992; Hokenstad & Midgley, 1997; Leonard, 1997; Lyons, 1999; Room, 1999).

International social work in a global context

International social work, as this article suggests, encompasses cross-national social work programmes that are based on the principle of mutuality and partnership. The term international social work implies, thus, that actors who are engaged in both social work theory and practice in their own country become actively engaged in the social services, education and practice of social work in one or more other countries. Such engagement could include bi-lateral cooperative projects encompassing social services, social-worker exchange programmes, consulting missions, joint ventures in education and development assistance projects. The new challenges imply that to engage in international social work requires additional skills in e.g. research, management and social planning; formulation, implementation, and evaluation of social policies and social projects; the composing of reports and formulation of propositions to the governments concerned; and new ways of managing and planning human services. One of the
main characteristics of international social work should be the implementation of the idea of partnership and reciprocity. International social work does not imply simply the outflow of knowledge and experience from the developed countries to the developing ones; it implies an inflow to the developed countries as well. In other words, international social work is less an endeavour emanating from one national source than a multidirectional web having the character of a decentred practice.

One of the main assumptions of this article is that globalisation constitutes an indispensable context for the development of international social work. To elucidate the prevailing approach in this article to the context of the international social work, i.e. globalisation, a brief discussion about the meaning of this concept seems necessary. Since the objective of the article is not to prove the reality of globalisation, the discussion about globalisation will be confined to the implications of this phenomenon for the theories and practices of social work. In this respect, some thoughts concerning the globalisation of consciousness and its consequences, i.e. globalisation of life ideals and of social problems, will be introduced, although only to a limited extent in order to not shade the main objective of the article which is to argue for the necessity of and the possible forms for carrying out international social work.

**Globalisation of consciousness and its consequences**

Globalisation is not a new phenomenon (Dickens, 1992), although it is only within the last two decades that most of the theories of globalisation have been formulated (Albrow, 1997; Axford, 1995; Delanty, 2000; Featherstone, 1990; Jameson, 1998; Robertson, 1992; Waters, 1995). For several hundred years, several processes of globalisation have been in force simultaneously; that is, the globalisation of economics, politics, knowledge and culture. Some of these globalisation processes have been more obvious, and thus more widely discussed, than others; for instance, the globalisation of economics. Ever since the onset of industrialisation and the consolidation of capitalism, production and trade have increasingly been globalised. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, Marx and Engels referred in their Communist Manifesto to the globalisation of markets and industry which, in their view, erased national boundaries and gave every nation’s production and consumption a cosmopolitan gestalt – a process that would eventually lead to the overall interdependence of all nations (Marx & Engels, 1999).

As a result of recent changes in communication and information technologies, the globalised media play an increasingly dominant role in our intellectual environment, producing a major part of our symbolic stimuli (Barker, 1999; Castells, 1996: 336). The media act, thus, as the immediate intellectual nurturing centre for the vast majority of mankind. One of the main consequences of the globalisation of mass communication is that a variety of transnational popular cultures have emerged. The globalised mass-media environment contributes to the global diffusion of diverse local symbols and ideals creating, not one, but several homogeneous representations and symbol worlds. In other words, the globalisation of the media has led to the creation of a number of local global cultures. Conveying impulses from different parts of the world, the globalisation of media can create the possibility of counteracting eurocentrism or other kinds of ethnocentrism. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the global media’s diffusion of local popular cultures does not exclude the tendency among huge global media concerns to monopolise reality.

As a result of the globalisation of cultures, aesthetic preferences and values tend to become more and more similar and homogeneous around the globe (Featherstone, 1991; Jameson, 1991; Shields, 1992). Ritzer (1993) discusses the process of the ‘McDonaldisation’ of society. In the same way it might be possible to refer to the processes of Ikea-isation, CNN-isation, Nike-isation and Survivor-isation. The same brand of clothing, the same home furniture, the same culinary taste, the same movies and shows, and the same news, debates and images of reality are found all across the globe. Internet sites are becoming increasingly like one another; in a short space of time we are now being nourished and nurtured by the same sources of mediating symbols.

Another relevant global change with respect to international social work is the emergence of ‘mega-cities’ and their corresponding lifestyle. According to Castells (1996: 378–386) mega cities have emerged where impulses from the whole world interact with one another. These cities are centres with a great attraction power, exercising great influence over their surroundings. They establish connections between continents and across large territories. They are globally united with their sister cities and locally severed from their regional and national contexts (Castells, 1996; Sassen, 1992). A characteristic of mega-cities is that they arise in different regions of the world and spread global life ideals and ways of thinking to their surroundings. That people actually live in traditional villages and are preoccupied with their everyday concerns is of less interest; what matters here is that their ideals, hopes and dreams are affected by and directed towards the lifestyle of the mega-cities. That is why a Chinese villager would rather wear a Polo Ralph Lauren garment – even though it is a fake – than a local brand of clothing. It must be emphasised, however, that the
production of the same dreams and ideals does not negate the enormous inequalities and differences in lifestyles and living conditions throughout the world, and that these inequalities and differences have in fact grown as a consequence of one-sided economic globalisation.

It would be naive not to realise that the tremendous changes in our physical and intellectual surroundings caused by globalisation also affect our symbols, representations and consciousness. Consciousness is shaped partly by the cultural products we consume. In this regard, it could be said that changes in the material conditions of life could transform our symbol world; and changes in how we understand room, time and the accessibility of the surrounding world could bring about changes in our consciousness. Our everyday consciousness is being exposed more and more to events far beyond the parameters of the nation-state. It is no longer through interaction with our immediate surroundings that our conceptual framework is formed, but through ceaseless references to the world as the main context. In this respect, this article aims to stress the idea that the increasing globalisation of the material basis of human experience could result in the emergence of a globalised consciousness brought about by the recent revolutions in media and communication technologies. This new consciousness affects our self-definition, expectations and life ideals, as well as how we define the surrounding environment and our possibilities within that environment. New possibilities and new problems may emerge as a result of the globalisation of consciousness, which in turn creates new challenges for the theory and practice of social work.

In the same way that modernisation and industrialisation, by changing our material world, transformed our ideas of the Self and its place in relation to the Other, the transition to global postmodern society will also change our understanding of how to organise everyday social life. Demands and desires might change more radically and more rapidly than political and economic possibilities change. Thus, one of the major consequences of the globalisation of consciousness becomes the globalisation of life ideals. The knowledge of events in other parts of the world and of alternative lifestyles affects our own life ideals, expectations and goals. What characterises the postmodern global consciousness is the idea of attainability. The global market, the ever-developing information technologies and the globalised popular culture have changed the frames of our definition of the attainable. The ability to travel from one corner of the globe to the other in a short time and become acquainted with the lifestyles of other societies via television, tourism and migration has contributed to the removal of the mental barriers that prevented people from encountering new life ideals. The world appears now closer to us than it was before and fewer things seem to us strange and unattainable. The fact that the world has witnessed several waves of mass immigration during the closing decades of the twentieth century indicates that an increasing number of people dare now to pursue and perhaps revise their life ideals. Although there have always been reasons for migration – wars, poverty, adverse political circumstances – and although the world has previously witnessed some examples of mass immigration, it is first during the last decades that migration has become a serious alternative for millions of people. Their new global consciousness tells them that it is possible to live as bountifully on the other side of the planet as it used to be in their own hemisphere. This raises the question of the cultural integration of disparate sections of the population into new global postmodern societies. Since economic globalisation and technological advances have apparently led to increasing concentrations of wealth, and consequently the marginalisation of increasingly larger segments of the world’s population, the gap between people’s reality and their desires is widening. This could lead in turn to aggravating the social problems of people living in poverty.

Another possible consequence of the globalisation of consciousness and of life ideals is the globalisation of social problems. The postmodern condition is often thought to have led to an intensification of individualism. Since the traditional support system of the family has been disturbed, if not undermined, by the encroachment of individualism and a modern lifestyle in most traditional societies, the role of social welfare services becomes essential to meet the needs of vulnerable people in these societies. This can be observed even in the more traditional or less modern/postmodern sections of the world. The weakening of ties in the community and the increase in nuclear or single-parent families requires that social welfare services try to meet needs that have traditionally been met by the family or the community. Conceptions of family, care and responsibility change due to political, economic and social changes. Individualisation leads to new views of family, childhood and old age. Obviously, this implies that we need to create new welfare policies and new social work practices. International social work could contribute to the transfer of the experiences of modern individualistic societies to societies in transition. One of the fundamental challenges of international social work, then, is to promote democratic ideals and to contribute to the development of policies and programmes that aim to integrate the world’s cultures. Needless to say, it is one of the objectives of this article to emphasise the humanistic and democratic character of social work while being conscious that social work might and has
been employed in oppressive and non-democratic purposes, too (Lorenz, 1994). Furthermore, this article tries consciously to focus on the possibilities and potentials that, in our belief, exist within the field of international social work. The processes of the globalisation of consciousness and the internationalisation of social work are still at a constituting stage. Therefore, it is of great importance to initiate a discussion at different levels and with different involved parties such as academicians, politicians and practitioners about the nature and significance of these processes in order to create a legitimate basis for those practitioners and theoreticians of social work who choose to carry out their profession beyond the boundaries of the national state. In the following section two new challenges for international social work will be discussed.

**Challenges for international social work**

**Consolidation of democracy**

Although one-sided economic globalisation and the unequal power relationship between the industrialised countries and the rest of the world pave the way for the ruthless exploitation of cheap manpower in the latter countries, globalisation also creates the preconditions for increased social justice and democracy in these countries. International social work can, via its extensive contacts and cooperation on core issues of social policy and social work, and by providing examples of alternative forms for organising social welfare and for a fairer distribution of income among different groups, and furthermore, by disseminating the belief in the international conventions on human rights and the rights of specific groups, enhance the idea of democracy and human rights. Not only is social work one of the most essential means for implementing social policy, it is also an important channel for influencing governments’ social welfare policies. In this respect, the integration of its values and principles into the social policies and welfare programmes of countries where they are lacking today will be a further major challenge for international social work. International social work has the potential to promote democracy, respect for human rights and social justice by fostering ideals of democracy at the grassroots level. Through community development and empowerment, international social work can implement emerging democratic ideas at the grassroots level and support the struggle for human rights. Traditionally, social workers see themselves as agents of social change and as interpreting social welfare on an egalitarian ideological basis. Having one foot in the system world and the other in the life-world, social workers have the possibility to reform and change them both according to the ideals of justice and human dignity. As discussed earlier, as a consequence of globalisation, social workers in different countries have begun to establish contacts with one another independent of their national governments, cooperating on core issues of social work across national boundaries.

There will be no authentic democracy in the world as long as the current differences in the distribution of income persist. Thus, poverty is a key obstacle to the establishment of real democracy in the world today. International social work should therefore promote social change and social policy development. International social work should contribute more effectively to the developing countries’ social development efforts (Midgley, 1995; 1999). Social-work education programmes should be redesigned to contribute to development. Therefore, a challenge for the profession is to become active at the policy-planning level to help overcome poverty and to harmonise social and economic interventions. Undoubtedly, international social workers acting from a grassroots level have a fairly limited possibility to influence the politics or the social structure of the societies they are acting in. They have, however, a great possibility to influence the individuals and the local communities with which they work directly and in this way implement democratic ideas and respect for human dignity.

**Consolidation of global solidarity and prevention of conflicts**

The international and inter-regional cooperation around issues of social policy and social work can in the long run lead to the constitution of a new form of solidarity that is built upon similarities among regions beyond national boundaries. This solidarity will not necessarily undermine the existing solidarity within the borders of nation-states; domestic solidarity is most often based on such enduring factors as religion, language and a common history. However, insight about shared problems could eventually lead to insight about, and even a demand for, shared efforts. The basis of this new solidarity underlying international social work is the idea of human interdependency while respecting individualism and human rights. This solidarity could be expressed in joint efforts against global poverty, the oppression of women and children and abuse and discrimination, to give just a few examples. International social work could thereby contribute to setting new global human values and ethics.

By emphasising social work’s core values of human dignity, solidarity, democracy and the individual’s right to adequate living conditions, at a level that exceeds the nation-state, and by directing its activities towards the whole of humanity instead of only the citizens of a specific society, international social work could play an...
important role in bridging the national and cultural gaps between the peoples with whom it works. International social work can make a valuable contribution if it shifts its focus from predominantly national issues and responds to the problems of international social deprivation; if it works toward securing international social justice and helps prepare and motivate people of different nationalities or ethnic groups for change, development and solidarity. There can be no doubt that international social work has much to offer the field of dissension, both nationally and internationally. The broadening of contact intersections and greater knowledge about other peoples’ life circumstances could help to counteract racism and ethnic conflicts and increase the understanding of refugees’ situations among social workers in the receiving countries. During and in the aftermath of the war in the Balkans, local and international social workers made a great effort to provide relief for the victims of war and destitution. After the peace, the activities of international social workers and schools of social work greatly contributed to the reconstruction of the social services and a welfare system in this region. The active presence of the Department of Social Work at Stockholm University, for instance, not only contributed to re-educating and enhancing the professional skills of local social workers, but also contributed to peace-building and reconciliation. By gathering under the same roof, in the same classroom, social work practitioners from ethnic groups formerly in conflict with one another and by supporting these social workers to recognise their common reality and common problems, international social workers from Sweden succeeded in helping their Bosnian colleagues to overcome their feelings of resentment and begin to cooperate.

International social work can and should, in this regard, promote a deeper understanding of human problems in a wide variety of contexts. Comparing other countries’ experiences of social work practices and their ways of defining problems and finding solutions for them might offer greater insight into one’s own country’s problems and inspire and enrich national and local social work practices. A consequence of engaging in international social work might, thus, be the enhancing of the profession’s scholastic knowledge as well as its practice. Experiences from recent years’ international social work activities indicate that participating in and studying the practices of social work in other countries has led to refining the practice of social work in the countries concerned (Dervisbegovic & Hessle, 1998). A case in point is the adoption in Sweden of the Family Conference method (Erkers & Nyberg, 2001), originating from native cultures in New Zealand, in doing social work with families; another is the spreading of the Swedish idea of stationing welfare officers in schools in Vietnam.

These are just two examples of the mutual benefits that can be derived from international social work.

As mentioned earlier, one of the objectives of this article is to shed light on the relationship between social work and its new global context. In addition to the globalisation of consciousness and its consequences, the weakening of the nation-state and the development of new inter-regional political organisations actualise new patterns for implementing welfare policies and doing social work.

**Weakening of the nation-state and its consequences**

Historically, the ideas of the welfare state, and hence the theories and practices of social work as the means for realising welfare policies, have emerged within the discourse of modernity (Leonard, 1997: 20). The emergence of the welfare state presupposed the transition of traditional feudal society to the modern industrialised nation-state organised according to the capitalist mode of producing and distributing wealth. Stressing the concepts of citizenship and citizens’ rights, the welfare state developed a clear societal and governmental responsibility for persons in vulnerable positions within the context of the nation-state. As they are part of the modern project, social work theories and practices are characterised by the principle of territoriality. Social welfare and social work have traditionally been considered to be the internal concern of the specific nation-state where they once developed.

Assuming that modernity, as the prevailing condition in the West and in many Eastern societies, is giving place to another condition, i.e. postmodernity, then it is plausible to conclude that new political unions (other than the nation-state) and new welfare policies might emerge. In this respect, some theorists, by stressing the affinity between political fragmentation and economic globalisation, predict the ‘hollowing out’ of the nation-state (Ohmae, 1992; Sassen, 1992) and the end of the welfare state and national welfare policies (Bauman, 1998: 69). Others, such as Leonard, go even further and maintain ‘The old welfare state, that once-seeming Jewel in the Crown of moral progress in democratic society, is finished’ (Leonard, 1997: 22). Still others, like Delanty, are more watchful and maintain that ‘the globalization thesis does not necessarily entail the end of nation-state’, although it has undermined the position of the states as the ‘sole actors’ of welfare politics (Delanty, 2000: 83). Nevertheless, the globalisation of economics and politics influences the forming of a national social welfare policy in one way or another. The globalisation of consciousness and life ideals, the fragmentation of social life and the intensification of individualism, and consequently, the globalisation of social problems under the postmodern condition actualise the need for new forms of solidarity and a new globalised approach to
social welfare and social work. As Leonard states, the ‘project of welfare’ must be regarded as a process and be reconstructed according to the premises that are valid for the actual condition (Leonard, 1997: 163).

Globalisation is often understood as a twofold tendency ‘towards a local encompassment of the global in cultural terms and at the same time an encompassment of the local by the global in material terms’ (Friedman, 1994: 12). Both divergence and convergence characterise, thus, globalisation and postmodernity. The reality of the postmodern condition might be said to be characterised by globalised localities. In other words, it is a reality where things are local and global both at the same time. Delanty (2000: 89) points at two coexisting logics of globalisation:

On the one hand, globalization can be seen as a logic of convergence, the formation less of a world society than of homogeneous and interacting units and, on the other hand, divergence, the fragmentation of common ties and the dislocation of life-worlds.

This implies the constitution of diverse groups of global localities characterised by both the absence of a centre and non-pervasiveness. This new condition demands the formation of welfare policies and social work practices that are locally and issue-oriented, while operating beyond the boundaries of the modern nation-state. Social work, like capital, should be free from the constraint of belonging to a specific territory. Social work is intended to be contextual, but only when attention is given to both its global context and its influence on the local context will it be possible to regard social work as contextual.

The idea of universalism, which is a constitutive of modernity, is based on a ‘single concept of truth and its categorical separation from the false’ (Leonard, 1997: 7). Postmodern globalisation signifies, on the one hand, a ‘rejection of a universal standard of beauty or truth’ (Bauman, 1998: 8), and on the other, the spreading of existing standards and ideals beyond national and cultural boundaries. The idea of ‘the universal’ ceases to exist in a global postmodern age and will be replaced by the idea of ‘convergence around divergence’. If modernity was built upon a conception of a universal value system that in reality was local (read Western), postmodernity is grounded on the parallel existence of diverse local value systems that have spread out globally far beyond the territorial and cultural boundaries of their societies of origin. Several local alternatives coexist and are globally diffused but include neither all the human societies nor necessarily whole nation-states. Globalisation entails the worldwide displacement and diffusion of all culture. The global age is a field of interacting frameworks that are likely to enhance the particular, the ‘local’, rather than the universal (Delanty, 2000: 85). The modern universalism inherent in social work paved the way for the emergence of an oppressive view within this profession. Based on the idea of the normality of the modern Western lifestyle, other lifestyles were pathologised (Dominelli, 1997). Globalisation of consciousness and life ideals could, on the other hand, lead to the consolidation of a global and postmodern identity that is rooted in several different, although equally normal, lifestyles. From what we have discussed so far it might be concluded that if modern welfare policy and modern social work practice reflected the ideology of modernity, then the new welfare policy and social work practice should reflect the reality and logics of postmodern global society. This would imply that the practice of social work should not be confined to the nation-state; rather, it should acknowledge the diversity that is a result of the intensified individualism and individual preferences for organising social life. The new anti-oppressive international social work should be adapted to the decentralised organisation of welfare and promote inter-regional cooperation between different interested parties of social work.

Challenges for international social work

Principle of inter-regionality

In the above, we stated that as a result of globalisation societies tend to come closer and their flanks become easier to trespass both physically and mentally. In this respect, we maintained that the globalisation of economics, increased international migration and globalised popular culture and media are contributing factors to the globalisation of individuals’ consciousness and life ideals. As a consequence of these processes of globalisation, we predicted that many social problems that until now typified certain societies might instead become globalised. For instance, we can observe that an intensified individualism and a lifestyle similar to that of modern industrial countries are dismantling traditional family and community networks in the urban areas of many underdeveloped countries, while migration has brought some of the problems characteristic of traditional societies closer to home in the postmodern developed societies. These new circumstances have resulted in the weakening of the nation-state and a situation where different regions of different countries now face similar if not the same problems.

We also stated that the transition to a postmodern global condition signifies the end of national welfare policies. Globalisation creates differences not only between countries but also between different regions within one and the same country. There is evidence of increasing inequality and polarisation in the distribution of wealth, not only between but also within countries.
Regions having a similar social and economic situation need not necessarily be situated within the same political border. In different countries regions with similar social and economic characteristics and problems tend to merge. Welfare policies and practices tend to transcend national boundaries and extend to diverse regions around the globe. Regions within the borders of a country cooperate with specific international actors regarding common issues. In terms of the issues facing social work, there may be more regional similarities between metropolitan regions in European and Asian countries than between urban areas and sparsely populated areas within the same country. Not least the consolidation of the EU has actualised the debates in favour of regionalisation (Wallace & Wallace, 2000: 31). These new circumstances have given free scope to local welfare actors such as social workers to establish international contacts independently of their national central governments. Examples of inter-regional cooperation between the social services of different countries are steadily becoming more frequent. In Sweden several communal and municipal social service offices have established their own contacts with their counterparts in countries like Bosnia & Herzegovina, Armenia, the Baltic countries and Vietnam.

An appropriate model for social work under these new conditions might be the re-centralisation of social work and the creation of solutions based on regional needs that extend beyond the borders of the individual nation-state. The terms for designing and implementing models of social work will no longer be nationally, but regionally, set and then together with other regions belonging to other countries. Inter-regional social work is more sensitive to local characteristics. Examples of common concerns for inter-regional social work are: combating poverty, health problems, environmental problems, drug abuse and smuggling, exploitation of women in sex trafficking leagues, and work to bring anti-oppressive and anti-racist issues to the fore.

Involving new social actors

In the global context of social work, the role played by universities and NGOs is rapidly increasing in importance. Many NGOs are de facto carrying out international social work in developing countries and in disaster areas. They are already dealing with the negative social consequences of problems created by globalisation, such as sex trafficking, drug abuse and crime. Besides such international organisations as UNDP and UNICEF, there are many national or regional non-governmental organisations involved in areas that have traditionally belonged to social work. The establishment of HealthNet (Kennett, 2001: 22), a networked information service supporting health-care workers in more than 30 developing countries, a vast majority of which are in Africa, is an example of the increasing international non-governmental cooperation within the field of social welfare.

Universities and schools of social work have been acting in the last few years as links between social work’s field of practice and governments. Universities and local actors, such as local governments, local social services and NGOs (both national and international), are becoming increasingly interactive. In many developed countries there is close cooperation between the government and social work researchers. Even in developing countries government agencies consult both national and international schools of social work and researchers for help in formulating and developing their country’s social legislation and social welfare policies (Hessle, 2001: 62). The presence of international universities and scientists works as a pressure mechanism on the national and local governments. In many cases it has been shown to be more convenient and less politically sensitive for a national or local government to listen to and even be inspired and influenced by scientists than to adhere to some international political conventions. This is because not all universities are regarded as the agents of a certain government and thus they can establish international contacts independently.

Another side of the globalisation of problems is the globalisation of solutions. Exchanging experiences and creating global local networks of social welfare actors leads to finding common solutions to problems. It is not unusual for individuals or groups of social work practitioners in one country to consult with universities in other countries for guidance and supervision in an area that is new to them or to their country. Such contacts are beneficial for the field of social work since universities, as organisations for research and education, are not limited to a certain local reality and thus have the possibility to develop an overall grasp of global problems as well as possible local answers to them. In this respect, universities can act as advisors at the regional, national and local levels in cooperation with local governments, social services and governments. In addition, around the world most of the establishments for higher education have a long tradition of international inter-university and interdisciplinary cooperation, which gives them the possibility to exchange knowledge and experiences which can in turn be beneficial for these academies’ counterparts in the practice of social work at the local level. In this regard, and through cooperation in the education of social workers, the universities can stand as the guarantors of the quality of the organisation of social welfare and the practice of social work on an international scale. Furthermore, since the universities are often organisations that enjoy relative stability and are unconstrained by whoever is setting the social
politics, for instance compared with the political structures, they can stand as the guarantors of the sustainability of ideals of social policies.

The activities of the Department of Social Work at Stockholm University in Bosnia & Herzegovina provide an elucidating example of the new role of the academies of social work education and research. Earlier we referred to the peace-enhancing and conflict-preventive effects of Stockholm University’s activities in the Balkans. Here we will point out the practical effects of these activities for enhancing social services and developing the social work curriculum in these countries. These are effects that have already marked the formation and transformation of the social welfare policy of the local governments in this region. One of the results of the international cooperation between several schools of social work in this region has been the establishment of a four-year educational programme in social work at the university of Banja Luka, in the entity Republika Srpska, within Bosnia & Herzegovina.

Conclusion

To remain true to its professional commitments, social work must tackle the challenge of redefining its role and mission in relation to the globalisation of consciousness and, consequently, the globalisation of social problems. Only in this way can social work contribute to promoting peace, social justice, equity and democracy at both the national and the international level. In responding to these challenges, social work has to reorganise itself internationally and become integrated within each specific country’s educational and organisational processes, particularly at the grassroots level. International social work could have good chances to contribute to the cultural integration of the world and the prevention of armed conflicts by implementing the core ideas of democracy and human rights at the grassroots level. International social work faces several closely related challenges. The first concerns the emergence of new global regions and the globalisation of local social problems; the second concerns the consolidation of democracy and human rights; the third the prevention of conflicts and the promotion of solidarity and peace through global cultural integration; and the fourth concerns the appearance of new actors in the promotion of social work. Corresponding to these new challenges, international social work can be carried out at different levels and in different forms; for instance, as common regional social work activities directed towards solving common or similar problems; expert exchange projects between regions at the grassroots level; activities aiming at increasing consciousness about international conventions at the grassroots level; activities aiming at influencing national social policies to incorporate and implement international conventions, human rights principles, gender equality issues and democratic ideals; development assistance projects; social educational projects; social research projects; disaster and emergency relief projects and activities aimed at strengthening peace and preventing conflicts.

References


