

*Abstract*

The integration of sustainability principles into the field of social work is a developing area of study and practice. This chapter delves into the different dimensions in which social work practices across diverse countries are adapting to address pressing social issues and long-term environmental challenges. It examines case studies from different parts of the globe that highlight the adaptable and innovative approaches used by social workers to promote Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



## **Integrating Sustainable Development Goals into Social Work: A Global Paradigm Shift and Implications**



The relationship between the social work profession and SDGs is becoming increasingly evident on a global scale. The intersection of these two fields gives rise to a new paradigm of comprehensive and sustainable social work, which provides essential tactics and insights necessary for tackling the global challenges of the twenty-first century. The chapter also explores the interrelationship between the SDGs and the global agenda for social work and social development.

**Keywords:** *Sustainable development, sustainability, social work profession, international social work, global agenda, social development.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The United Nations (UN) officially adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), often known as the Global Goals, in 2015. These objectives represent a comprehensive and inclusive call to action aimed at tackling poverty eradication, environmental preservation, and the advancement of peace and prosperity for all citizens by the year 2030 (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], n.d.). SDGs represent a universal appeal for collective action from nations across the economic spectrum, encompassing impoverished, affluent, and intermediate-income countries. The main goal is to promote economic prosperity while ensuring the protection of the environment. The recognition of the need to eliminate poverty entails the concurrent adoption of strategies that promote economic growth and address other social needs, including education, healthcare, social security, and employment opportunities. Furthermore, it is imperative that these endeavours also confront the barriers presented by climate change and the preservation of the ecosystem (Neshovski, 2023).

Murray Ross, a Canadian community scholar, had a significant role in the development of differential social work techniques within the context of community-focused practice (Weil et al., 2012). Fundamentally, social work is a profession that is dedicated to assisting individuals in achieving optimal functioning within their respective contexts. The objective of this endeavour is to not only acknowledge and tackle individual issues but also to examine the broader societal frameworks that may contribute to personal difficulties. Social workers are guided by the fundamental principle that each person possesses intrinsic worth and dignity. They actively promote human rights, social justice and the enhancement of overall well-being for all individuals. The field acknowledges the interdependence of human connections and endeavours to enhance the welfare of individuals, families, and communities through direct intervention, policy formulation, and community mobilization.

SDGs have presented social workers with novel prospects to enhance their professional endeavours from a worldwide standpoint. It is imperative to recognize and discern novel opportunities for social work professionals, integrating them into their professional curriculum and developing pedagogical resources to engage with emerging target populations within the realm of Social Work Education (Pandey & Kumar, 2017). Moreover, each goal is highly pertinent to the social work fields and can significantly enhance the profession while effectively achieving the sustainable objectives outlined in the Goals. The integration of a human rights perspective into SDGs, particularly in the delineation of concerns and the establishment of implementation frameworks, holds significance for the social work profession (Jayasooria, 2016).

International social work involves the worldwide and regional advancement of social work education and practice. It aims to establish a comprehensive international profession that demonstrates the ability of social workers to effectively tackle the diverse global challenges that greatly affect the well-being of a substantial portion of the world population (Cox & Pawar, 2013).

This chapter explores the contribution of the profession of social work towards the attainment of the SDGs so far. The theoretical underpinnings of this review are an examination of the foundational ideas and frameworks that establish the connections between SDGs and social work. Additionally, this chapter investigates the global agenda for social workers in the light of SDGs. The inclusion of numerous initiatives, collaborations, and partnerships aims to enhance the comprehension of practical applications of social work practices to attain the SDGs. Case studies from various regions around the world shed light on real-life success stories and inspire. The training and teaching pedagogies in social work education are also investigated to identify the most effective approaches and areas for improvement. The challenges which are faced to implement the SDGs and the practical recommendations are also included. This discussion also encompasses the on-going efforts aimed at the fulfilment of the SDGs through the social work profession.

### **Alignment of Social Work Principles with SDGs**

The evaluation of sustainable development frequently relies on the utilization of the three pillars of the sustainability framework, which encompasses the examination of social, economic, and environmental indicators. The measurement of individual system performance is believed to provide insights into the overall sustainability of the system (Wallis et al., 2011). Human associations and interpersonal connections constitute the foundational spheres of social work (Weil et al., 2012). The profession of social work is founded upon a strong ethical framework and a set of professional values that are focused on promoting the welfare of individuals, advocating for social justice, and upholding the inherent dignity and worth of every individual. The values and principles exhibit a notable similarity and congruence with the SDGs set forth by the UN. Through the process of analyzing the fundamental principles and values that underpin social work, and subsequently aligning them with the SDGs, a theoretical congruence and resonance in terms of values can be identified between these two domains.

SDGs incorporate a three-pronged strategy that encompasses the dimensions of environmental, social, and economic welfare, which aligns with the environmental, social, and economic justice commitments of the social work field. Moreover, the networked systems architecture of the SDGs aligns with the

ecological systems perspective that is fundamental to the social work practice (Kaloga & Reno, 2022). The social work community is increasingly adopting proactive measures to effectively address global concerns and advance novel theories and solutions, such as the emergence of green social work, aimed at mitigating the impacts of climate change and promoting environmental sustainability (Healy, 2001).

Social workers are bound by ethical commitments that encompass the pursuit of social justice, necessitating a comprehensive integration of intellectual comprehension and political engagement. (Bell & Hafford-Letchfield, 2015). The notion of “meeting people where they are” is an essential aspect of social work. The grassroots approach confers a notable benefit in effectively tackling the SDGs. There is a growing recognition within academic circles that the social work field holds major importance in influencing and contributing to the development of successful strategies and interventions in response to climate change, environmental degradation, and disasters (Drolet et al., 2015).

### **Social Work Profession and the SDGs**

The social work profession holds a crucial role as a strategic collaborator with the UN SDGs and its aspirations. This is because social work can effectively communicate and express the concerns and priorities of communities concerning policy objectives (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2021). Social work holds major significance among other academic fields, primarily due to the direct influence that social work practitioners’ expertise can have on the achievement of SDGs (Pandey & Kumar, 2017). SDGs present social workers with an opportunity to reconsider their function in relation to the people’s empowerment, socio-economic growth, human rights protection, and environmental concerns (Jayasooria, 2016).

At the global level, three prominent organisations in the realm of social work, IFSW, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) significantly contribute to the formation of a comprehensive worldwide comprehension and potential consensus. By October 2019, a total of 178 social work associations worldwide had reached a consensus on the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles and the Global Definition of Social Work within the framework of IFSW. It is postulated that these agreements, along with the underlying common principles and norms, have the potential to improve the professional standing of social workers both globally and locally (Sonnenberg, 2021).

## **The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development**

The Global Agenda expands the potential for social workers, as the goals and ideals of the SDGs share major significance and applicability to the field of social work (Jayasooria, 2016). The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development was established in 2010 through the collaborative efforts of the IASSW, ICSW, and IFSW (Jones & Truell, 2012). These associations engaged in a collaborative and consultative process spanning three years to examine the sector's contribution to the Development Agenda of Post-2015. These three entities encompass professionals in the fields of social development, social work, and education, as well as several international, national, and local organisations. In the pursuit of a more promising future, it was imperative to acknowledge as a collective the disparate outcomes resulting from political, economic, social, and cultural systems within distinct contexts. These repercussions have been observed to have detrimental effects on individuals, as evidenced by their prevalence in the local, national and global communities (IFSW et al., 2012).

The initial ten-year period of the agenda exerted a notable influence on the worldwide social work community, hence affecting social work practice. This occurred concurrently with the growing global apprehensions around inequality and environmental sustainability issues. The progression of the agenda as it enters into its second decade encompasses the deliberate extension of partnerships to incorporate service consumers and other relevant stakeholders, in addition to aligning with the UN SDGs (Jones & Truell, 2012).

### **Empowering the Vanguard: The Imperative of Education and Training for Social Work Professionals in SDG Competencies**

SDGs signify a notable progression in the collective worldwide commitment to development, surpassing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In a similar vein, the social work field education has the potential to advance beyond the concept of "international social work" and embrace the notion of "global social work." This paradigm shift in understanding social issues entails recognizing their transnational nature, rather than confining them to a certain nation or region. Consequently, it emphasizes the importance of social workers from all countries in collectively tackling these challenges (Mapp & Gatenio Gabel, 2022).

The incorporation of the social development perspective and the SDGs holds significant importance in the realm of international social work practice. The SDGs and the social development perspective embody a convergence of various disciplinary orientations (Addo et al., 2022). For the facilitation of the

progression of social work towards more sustainable development outcomes, it is imperative to establish explicit aims and indicators for both social work education and practice. Moreover, these targets and indicators should be aligned with the 17 SDGs (Lombard, 2015).

According to the Asia Pacific Association for Social Work Education, China boasts over 100 colleges and universities that provide social work training, making it the country with the most notable expansion in social work education. Vietnam has also made recent strides in this field, establishing three schools of social work. Currently, Malaysia is home to a collective of five educational institutions that are specifically focused on the discipline of social work. In contrast, countries such as Japan, India, Singapore, and the Philippines have a long-standing history of social work education and have successfully established rigorous benchmarks for graduate-level social work programs (Baikady & Channaveer, 2017).

Field education is a significant aspect of social work education, requiring social work faculty and field educators to possess a comprehensive understanding of their students' learning and growth throughout the field education experience. By acknowledging the various approaches by which students acquire knowledge and grow within social work organisations, educators and instructors can enhance their comprehension of students' educational needs and adeptly offer assistance throughout the experiential learning journey (Papouli, 2014). Fieldwork learning in social work serves as a fundamental foundation for the implementation of sustainable development strategies. Social workers possess the potential to address social issues and facilitate social development through comprehensive training and practical field experiences. The field of education curriculum ought to incorporate a diverse range of methodologies and approaches to effectively shape social work professionals who are capable of attaining the SDGs through the application of social work principles.

### **Challenges, Future Implications and Recommendations for Social Work in Advancing the SDGs**

Both emerging and developed countries are encountering challenges in achieving sustainable development due to the processes of globalisation, privatization, and liberalization (Baikady & Channaveer, 2017). Globalisation has led to an increased interconnectedness of social issues. The possession of a global perspective and comprehensive understanding of cross-cultural dynamics is vital for social workers in this context. Social work practice that encompasses the intersection of environmental and human rights concerns is sometimes tasked with resolving structural challenges that are perceived as politically

sensitive, perhaps leading to contentious situations. However, it is inevitable for social workers to align themselves with their service users as collaborative participants in the process of societal progress. They must confront matters of injustice and inequality with bravery and unwavering commitment while adhering to the established values and principles of the social work profession (Jayasooria, 2016).

Several significant advancements have transpired after the implementation of the SDGs. Nations have commenced the integration of the SDGs into their respective national plans and strategies, with the establishment of coordinating mechanisms to ensure a cohesive implementation process (UN, 2019). The integration of digital tools and platforms in the field of social work has become more prevalent due to the growing utilisation of technology. This trend allows social workers to enhance their services and effectively cater to the needs of their customers. Potential options for enhancing healthcare delivery include the implementation of telemedicine services, provision of online therapy, and utilisation of artificial intelligence algorithms to optimise intervention strategies.

The issue of rising inequality has become a prominent concern, as wealth and income disparities continue to expand on a worldwide scale. In light of this, social workers are anticipated to assume a crucial position in addressing this issue by lobbying for policies that foster economic parity, aligning with the objectives outlined in SDG1 (No Poverty) and SDG10 (Reduced Inequalities). Environmental advocacy has become more focused on the pressing issues of environmental degradation and climate change. Social workers are expected to take an important role in the promotion of community resilience, disaster preparedness, and the advocacy for sustainable policies that are in line with the objectives outlined in SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land).

Training and education initiatives should be implemented to provide social work professionals with the necessary knowledge and skills about SDGs. This will enable them to effectively connect their professional practices with the global standards and objectives set out by the SDGs. Collaboration is the establishment of partnerships between social work institutions and other stakeholders, including governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the commercial sector. This collaborative approach aims to provide comprehensive solutions for addressing societal challenges.

It is imperative to urge social workers to actively engage in advocating for policies and practices that facilitate the achievement of SDGs, with particular emphasis on domains such as social protection, access to fundamental services, and the safeguarding of human rights. It is recommended to allocate

resources towards doing research aimed at quantifying the effects of social work treatments.

## **Discussion**

The profession of social work is transforming in response to global shifts, and SDGs guide it to pursue social equity and address social challenges. The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development sheds light on the integration of the SDGs within the social work field, emphasizing its significance for the profession. Moreover, it can be seen that the global definition of social work, the Global Agenda, and the worldwide Standards for Social Work Education and Training all indicate that the promotion of sustainable development is encompassed within the purview of the practice of social work on a worldwide scale (Bromfield & Duarte, 2022).

Social work practices around the world often play a crucial role in integrating SDGs into their work. Here are a few cases of social work practices from different parts of the world that integrate the SDGs:

### **Case Study 1: Fostering Resilience to Environmental Problems in Kenya**

Vulnerable communities are often impacted more severely by environmental changes and issues. In Kenya, social workers have shown that by creating interventions that focus on building resilience using local resources, these communities can be supported effectively. Through culturally appropriate charitable initiatives, community-based microfinancing, and fundraising, social work interventions have successfully reduced inequalities (SDG 10) and built resilience against environmental adversities in these communities (Willett & Kvam, 2019). By leveraging community support for vulnerable individuals to build resilience after community-wide environmental change, social work interventions in Kenya have built sustainable communities (SDG 11).

### **Case Study 2: Homelessness Prevention in the United States**

Homelessness is a complex social issue in the United States, and social work practices are instrumental in addressing and preventing it. Social workers play a vital role in providing support and resources to individuals and families at risk of homelessness (Larkin et al., 2018). Social workers collaborate with homeless shelters, government agencies, and non-profit organizations to provide housing assistance to individuals and families on the verge of homelessness. This includes emergency shelter, transitional housing, and rental assistance. The efforts of social workers to prevent homelessness contribute to SDG 11 by promoting the development of inclusive, safe, and sustainable cities. Homelessness often leads to a range of health issues. Social work practices related to homelessness prevention aim to improve the health and well-being of those at risk, aligning with SDG 3.



### **Case Study 3: Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality in India**

Social work practices in India are directly aligned with SDG 5, which seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. These initiatives aim to break down barriers, promote women's rights, and create opportunities for women to thrive in all aspects of life (Anand, 2023). Social workers in India often work with women's self-help groups, where women come together to save, access credit, and support each other in various economic activities. These groups promote financial independence and women's participation in economic decision-making. Many social work programmes in India focus on improving access to education for girls and women, addressing issues such as female dropout rates, early marriage, and gender-based violence. This contributes to both gender equality and quality education (SDG 4). Moreover, social workers often conduct awareness campaigns on women's legal rights, including protection against domestic violence, harassment, and discrimination. This empowers women to assert their rights and seek justice.

Social workers and welfare communities play an important role in resolving social problems and enhancing social well-being in the region. They achieve this by expanding indigenous social networks to encompass interventions from the commercial, public, and community sectors (Baikady & Channaveer, 2017). Social workers serve an essential part in establishing and nurturing collaborations within communities and among diverse stakeholders, operating at the international, national and local levels. They aim to effectively translate the UN SDGs into tangible outcomes that encompass social, economic, and ecological dimensions. By engaging in collaborative efforts, social workers actively facilitate the development of innovative and sustainable solutions, thereby facilitating the implementation of the SDGs. Social workers globally are actively engaged in collaborating with their communities to facilitate transformative change, as shown in the Global Agenda Reports by IFSW (IFSW, 2021).

IFSW envisions and upholds the ethical standards that guide the profession of social work in fulfilling its responsibilities through strategic collaboration with various partners. The members of IFSW currently engage in collaborative efforts with UN agencies and governmental bodies, facilitating the interaction between communities, SDGs, and other UN initiatives. Social workers have a pivotal role in establishing connections between theoretical frameworks and practical applications, as well as facilitating collaboration among individuals, groups, and civil society. Moreover, they serve as intermediaries bridging the gap between local and national authorities. The analysis of the structural underpinnings is crucial to safeguard communities and assume the distinct duty of social work in collaborating with diverse partners (IFSW, 2021).

Social workers are employed at both the non-governmental and governmental levels, specifically in the areas of policy and programme implementation. Additionally, social workers engage in advocacy efforts aimed at promoting empowerment and development. This aspect is an integral component of the social work practice. Therefore, social workers must receive training in high-level policy coordinating procedures (Baikady & Channaveer, 2017). Furthermore, the SDG Agenda emphasizes the necessity of a worldwide collaboration, involving all nations and stakeholders, to collectively strive towards the attainment of the goals and targets. This collaborative effort encompasses a diverse range of participants, including multinational corporations, local governing bodies, regional and international organizations, and civil society groups (Caiado et al., 2018).

The establishment of a collaborative alliance between governmental entities and other organisations is expected to enhance community development by employing a diverse range of programmes. The rapid process of globalisation is leading to the emergence of global challenges, which can be mitigated through international cooperation and collaboration beyond national boundaries. The incorporation of SDGs into the education and training of social work professionals holds the potential to usher in a transformative era characterised by the establishment of sustainable societies. The integration of sustainability-focused curriculum and pedagogical approaches should be embraced by the profession of social work to effectively educate social workers. To effectively accomplish the SDGs through community activities in diverse areas of social work, it is imperative to establish innovative frameworks.

## **CONCLUSION**

Social workers play a crucial role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the UN. This chapter explores how values, ethics, and principles within the social work profession are linked to the SDGs. To achieve the SDGs, the social work profession integrates diverse strategies and approaches in collaboration with national and international entities. The chapter also looks into how the global agenda for social work and social development supports SDGs. It emphasizes the need to adapt various teaching and training programs in social work education. Additionally, this chapter includes case studies from different regions worldwide to provide insights into the strategies and approaches that contribute to achieving the SDGs. Finally, it emphasises that the social work profession has the potential to address social problems and inequalities through collaborative efforts with various local, national, and international partners, facilitating the achievement of SDGs.

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