The Role of Social Workers as Human Rights Workers with Disadvantaged People and Communities*

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we meet today, the Kukkarahalli / Paduvarahalli people. Thank you to the Academic Staff College, University of Mysore for inviting me to speak today.

Also, thank Prof. Muzaffar Assadi, the Course Coordinator for his introduction. Social workers by very definition are human rights workers. Social workers help individuals realize their rights everyday and are ideally placed to help communities claim their collective rights.

Disadvantaged people and communities are very often ‘social work clients.’ Social workers are working towards empowering and rights-based practice that develops individual and community capacity.

Social work is a profession that is built on: Code of Ethics:

The pursuit and maintenance of human well-being.

Social work aims to maximize the development of human potential and the fulfillment of human needs.

The Code of Ethics goes on to state that two of the key values and principles are: human dignity and worth; and social justice. Human dignity and worth means that social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of every person and respect the human rights as expressed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Social justice encompasses the satisfaction of basic needs; fair access to services and benefits to achieve human potential; and recognition of individual and community rights.

These values and principles in the Code of Ethics already establish the foundations for human rights based social work practice. They readily acknowledge human rights principles, explicitly the Universal Declaration. But what does human rights based social work practice look like in real life? To sketch some of these issues I will be borrowing from Professor Jim Ife and his work on human rights and social work.[1]

Human rights are often categorized as first, second and third generations.

First generation rights are civil and political rights, like the right to vote, freedom of speech, and freedom from discrimination, fair trial, etc.

Second generation rights are economic, social and cultural rights, like the right to health, housing, social security and education.

Third generation rights are collective rights, such as the right to development and self-determination.

In terms of social work practice, realizing first generation rights means advocacy either on behalf of individuals or disadvantaged groups. Social workers working in advocacy might be involved in the protection of civil and political rights through advocacy groups, refugee action groups or prisoner reform.

Working to realize second generation rights is the bread and butter work of most social workers. It involves putting services in place to meet rights like the right to education, health care, housing, income and so on. So, every time a social worker takes a client to assist them to get income support, or liaises with the Department of Housing to find accommodation, or refers them to a community health centre for physical, social or emotional support they are engaging in a form of human rights work.

Third generation rights are collective rights which intersect perfectly with the social work practice of community development. Community development, the discipline I focused on in my career, is a way of working with, rather than for, communities to increase their capacity and ability to find their own solutions to problems. Social workers are facilitators for this process of change that occurs from the grassroots in a bottom-up way.

Professor Jim Ife and Lucy Fiske have argued that the relationship between community development and human rights is symbiotic in that:

Community development needs a human rights based framework if it is to be successful, and human rights needs a community development framework if they are to be realized.[2]

The marrying together of community development practices and human rights principles is being increasingly recognized at the United Nations level. The United Nations Common Understanding of a Human Rights Based Approach to Development Cooperation sets out necessary elements of policy development and service delivery under human rights based approach as follows:

1. People are recognized as key actors in their own development, rather than passive recipients of commodities and services.
2. Participation is both a means and a goal.
3. Strategies are empowering, not disempowering.
4. Both outcomes and processes are monitored and evaluated.
5. Analysis includes all stakeholders.
6. Programmes focus on marginalized, disadvantaged, and excluded groups.
7. The development process is locally owned.
8. Programmes aim to reduce disparity.
9. Top-down and bottom-up approaches are used in synergy.
10. Situation analysis is used to identify immediate, underlying, and basic causes of development problems.
11. Measurable goals and targets are important in programming.
12. Strategic partnerships are developed and sustained.
13. Programmes support accountability.

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to all stakeholders. [3] To me, these principles reflect what social workers are striving for and of course, how many social workers are actually practising already.

Community development has a special role in working with communities as many of our communities are struggling with enormous problems and disadvantages. The problems that we face are so complex and often so entrenched that it can be counterproductive to just intervene at an individual level.

Many communities are really struggling but I am a firm believer that they, nonetheless, hold the answers to their problems. The role for social workers is enabling them to access these solutions and strengths, consistent with their human rights.

I would just like to consider the intervention in terms of community development principles and the practice of social work. Community development is about building capacity through participation and local solutions. Top down approach which misses crucial opportunities to actually ask communities what they want and how they think problems should be solved.

Some would argue that the ends justify the means. That is, we need to be pragmatic and act now to stop the violence. This might mean that things like consultation and community participation are too time consuming and get forgotten about or intentionally disregarded. However, I am firmly of the opinion that the ends simply don’t justify the means in this case.

What I would like to say is that you cannot expect to create good policy that is in breach of human rights. Human rights are universal or in other words, they apply to everyone equally and no human rights should be set above others. Obviously the government has an obligation to act to protect the rights of women and children from violence and abuse but this cannot be at the expense of the right to non-discriminatory treatment. If we start privileging some rights over others we get into the slippery situation where governments pick and chose which rights they think are important to uphold and which are an inconvenience, and so don’t get met. And we know that it will always be the most disadvantaged and powerless that will have their rights violated as they do not have the voice or means to be heard.

If there is one thing that we can learn from good community development practices, it is that the process is often just as, if not more, important than the outcomes because it equips the community to then be able to do things for themselves.

Without a sense of control over life, people quickly slip into a state of powerlessness.

I note that social work curricula across the nation devote a significant amount of time and focus to looking at skills for working with people and communities in the context of historical, social, economic and cultural considerations, so that the social workers of tomorrow are well versed in issues that impact on their disadvantaged clients.

Importantly, I think, we have seen social work shift to a more critical focus where students are given the skills to question power and structures at both a macro and micro levels. This can be seen in the way reflective practice is taught to students. This makes them more aware of their own position as social workers (and the power that often holds) and challenges them to continually find better, more inclusive ways of working. Ongoing reflection and learning keeps them from falling into the traps of the past.

It is great to see a growing number of disadvantaged people entering the profession. More disadvantaged workers who are accessible to their communities will ultimately, it is hoped, improve community perceptions of the profession.

Some of the stories are inspirational and there are some lessons that I am sure will resonate with your own thinking and practice.

In some ways, none of this is news for social workers who work in alliance with individuals, families and communities to deal with the consequences of family violence and child abuse every day. But I would challenge you to look at these problems, your interactions with clients and communities in terms of human rights issues. As I’ve shown, human rights are not just lofty principles that get talked about at the United Nations. They are our everyday experiences of getting our needs met and an expression of our shared humanity. They give social workers a framework for their advocacy, direct service and community development work, especially when social workers can often be the ones caught in the middle of the political minefield which is policy implementation. Human rights are above politics and ideology so they are a useful tool in arguing for change.

I’d also suggest that a human rights based approach to social work is about making clear targets, ensuring targets are met and outcomes are evaluated. We are entitled to expect that public policy will be:

• evidence-based and informed by best practice models;
• consistent with human rights laws and principles;
• designed to meet targets and deliver measurable benefits over time;
• subject to rigorous and transparent monitoring, evaluation and review, and
• that governments will employ a learning framework so that past mistakes will not be revisited.

Rights do not come without responsibilities. By this I mean that just as governments have an obligation to protect rights, they also have a responsibility to ensure these rights can be and are met. Social workers have long been involved in advocacy and campaigning for social justice but I’d also ask that you continue to ask important questions that provoke accountability. Social workers, with their strengths in reflective practice and learning from practice, are ideally placed to be arguing for better evaluation and evidence led policy to ensure rights and responsibilities are met.

You are also ideally placed to disseminate information about best practice models and approaches – to draw governments’ attention to what is
working in disadvantaged communities both here and overseas – and to advocate for changes that will deliver the best possible outcomes and opportunities for our children and our communities.

Human rights based social work is important in all the work we do, but perhaps even more so for disadvantaged people and communities.

The Declaration reaffirms that individuals are entitled to all human rights recognized in international law without discrimination. But it also acknowledges that without recognizing the collective rights of peoples and ensuring protection of our cultures, people can never truly be free and equal. This is where social work community development can support communities in ways which are empowering, based on partnership and recognizing culture to move forward.

Your expertise, commitment to the fundamental principles of social work and hard work on the ground is critical to assist people meet their human rights.

References:

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