COMMUNITY SOCIAL WORK: A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Sustainability represents one of the most revolutionary paradigm shifts of the 20th century, with consequences for social work. In the context of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, Sustainable Development Goals, and the theme of World Social Work Day, 2017; this paper draws from different theoretical foundations in social work which relate to the various dimensions of sustainability so as to discuss building sustainable communities through community social work. Sustainable development is congruent with community social work in terms of strategies, skills and values; and hence, building sustainable communities through community social work can have a pivotal role in sustainable development.

Keywords: Community social work, social work, sustainable development and sustainable communities

Introduction

Sustainability represents one of the most revolutionary paradigm shifts of the 20th century, with consequences for social work as it is closely related to the relationship between human communities, their future and their environment. The *environmental crises* including the over-exploitation of finite resources, environment pollution, climate

changes, environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity; *social crises* including social problems, social exclusion and discrimination, conflicts and migration at local and global levels, social injustice; *sustainable development goals* and *the awareness in the social work community of problematic disconnections between social work and environmental issues* create the background to the social work community's commitment to sustainable development (World Social Work at the UN in Geneva, 2017 and 2018)[29].

Sustainable development is an area of legitimate focus for the social work profession and the relationship between social work and sustainable development is a growing concern (Agoramoorthy & Hsu, 2008; Carrilio, 2007; Hall, 1996; Pandey, 1998; Surak & Rogge, 2005), and on the international level there is a growing awareness of the importance of ecological challenges and sustainable development for the profession (IFSW, 2011). There is normative concurrence between social work and sustainable development in terms of attention to well-being, equality, human rights and participation, which gives rise to possibilities for each to reinforce the other (Peeters, 2011)[22].

In 2010, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) declared that sustainability is the social justice issue of the new century, with the theme of the 56th CSWE annual program meeting being "Promoting Sustainability in Social Work." There are three types of sustainability in social work: social, economic and environmental. Social work focused on the social, touched on the economic, and largely ignored the environmental (Dewane, 2011)[5]. The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development recognizes the need to link social work education and practice and sustainable social development into a single collaboration (Truell and Jones, n.d.)[27].

The Global Agenda of Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030) provides social workers an opportunity to redefine their role pertaining to people empowerment, socio-economic development, human rights and the environment. Social workers can relate to Agenda 2030 at the national, regional and global levels. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) bring an interconnected understanding of human needs

and concerns that are economic, social and environmental. The SDGs and social work values concur: for instance, Agenda 2030 uses terms such as human dignity, inclusivity, respect for diversity, equality and non-discrimination, empowerment, reliance, resilience, and self-help and realization of one's full potential. Social workers identify with these values for practice. There is also a close parallel between social work target groups and those identified in the SDG agenda. Among the specific target groups are women, children, and youths, persons with disabilities, older persons, indigenous peoples, internally displaced people, migrants and refugees.

Social workers must study the SDGs and note the relevance with which social work theory and practice can inform, as well as draw, on the SDGs. The integrated, cross-cutting approach of the SDGs is a most suitable platform for social work practice. The multidimensional approach is holistic, and therefore more realistic in addressing the core concerns of ordinary people. In addition, the SDGs provide social workers a new role in monitoring and enhancing their implementation (Jayasooria, 2016)[14]. Paul Ladd, Director, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), stated that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides an important opportunity to strengthen the role and contribution of social work in national development processes. Social workers can be key agents for implementing many of the Sustainable Development Goals. The SDGs can be used as useful tools to enhance social work practice in addressing root causes through effective social work intervention strategies. The SDGs provide an excellent opportunity for social workers to develop an integrated intervention program at the grassroots (Jayasooria, World Social Work Day at the UN in Geneva, 2017)[30]. The topic of the World Social Work Day is set for two years, according to the objectives of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development. "Promoting Community and Environmental Sustainability" which relates to the third pillar of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development was the main topic of World Social Work Day, 2017 and will be the same for 2018 (World Social Work at the UN in Geneva, 2017 and 2018)[29].

It is in this global context of sustainability, drawing from the concept of sustainable development; and from different theoretical foundations in social work which relate to the various dimensions of sustainability that this paper discusses building sustainable communities through community social work.

A Conceptual Review

The concepts of community social work, sustainable development and sustainable communities; and the contexts of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development are reviewed on the following premises, based on which the paper is constructed:

- Community social work and sustainable development have some congruence,

- Community social work can build sustainable communities, and

- Sustainable communities contribute to sustainable development.

Community Social Work

The concept 'community social work' grew in the 1970s and 1980s in Britain as part of a philosophy of decentralizing and de-bureaucratizing social work provisions (Hadley and Hatch, 1981 as in Payne, 2005)[19], and gained common currency following the publication of the Barclay Report in 1982 (Hadley et al., 1987)[9]. Several authors embraced the term to denote social work approaches to community practice in an international context.

Community social work is typically associated with ideas of self-help, voluntarism and facilitating access to local services (Forde and Lynch, 2014)[7]. It focuses on the needs of small communities, and, allied with a range of social care services, seeks to engage those communities in providing locally responsive services that meet identified needs (Payne, 2005)[19]. According to Hadley et al. (1987)[9], community social work means more than simply a set of skills or a particular method of delivering services to clients. It is founded on a fundamentally different conception of the relationship between public services and the people they serve. It is built on the assumption of collective responsibility for

dealing with a range of social problems and their impact on individual citizens. In essence, community social work is about 'dialogue,' i.e, dialogue between the social worker and the user, between the organizer and the neighbourhood, and is concerned with shaping and amending services in response to the needs and growth of the community.

Community social work involves understanding the power dynamics and social relations that govern the relationships between various structures and diverse communities and working to achieve social justice through structural change (Canadian Association of Social Workers)[12], and recognizing and managing conflict in as deliberate and rational a manner as possible (Grosser and Mondros in Taylor and Roberts, 2013)[24]. It focuses on the inter-relationship with, and support for, formal and informal networks in order to address individual and group problems and to prevent problems from arising in the first place (Holiček and Baldwin in Leskošek, 2009)[10]. By its nature, community social work involves a process of change from an existing model of reactive social care to what is described in the Barclay Report as an attitude of mind in all social workers, which regards members of the public as partners in the provision of social care. The Barclay Report defined community social work in the following way:

> "By this we mean formal social work, which, starting from problems affecting an individual or group and the responsibilities and resources of social services departments and voluntary organizations, seeks to tap into, support, enable and underpin the local networks of formal and informal relationships which constitute our basic definition of community, and also the strengths of a client's communities of interest" (Barclay, 1982, p. xvii)[1].

The Barclay Report, as cited by Teater and Baldwin (2012)[25] argued strongly that community social work is not a blueprint for action but more a way of thinking about providing supportive services. It

Report of a Working Party established by the National Institute for Social Work in 1980 under the chairmanship of Peter M. Barclay "to review the role and tasks of social workers in local authority social services departments and related voluntary agencies in England and Wales and to make recommendations."

provides the knowledge, skills and values to promote services that reduce discrimination and promote equality.

According to Bennet (1986), the key components of community social work include the functions of a whole social work agency; collaborative working within teams; working in harmony with both formal and informal social networks; focus on the type and nature of relationships between individuals, families, organizations, groups and the community; recognition that the bulk of care, supervision, and control in the community is undertaken by members of the community; pro-activeness and readily availability of resources to those in need; and planning to help maximize effectiveness (Watts in Lishman, 1991)[28]. Smale et al. (1988) argued that community social work involves a process of working out aims and objectives through a review of needs and resources with a wide range of people (Coulshed and Orme, 2006)[2].

In this paper, community social work is perceived as a way of thinking, a dialogue, a process, an attitude of mind and an approach for making changes in communities so as to promote social change and sustainable development to achieve social justice. It is viewed as formal social work in which a "tripartite linkage" is created between needs or problems, local resources or services, and formal or non-formal local networks in the communities, all of which contribute to the sustainability of communities.

Sustainable Development

The term "sustainable development" has become a flagship for the diffuse set of concerns regarding the tensions between the exploitation of the potential of nature in the pursuit of human well-being, and a cumulative undermining through resource depletion and ecological disruption of the basis of collective welfare - the welfare, that is, of human as well as non-human life on earth (Faucheux, n.d.)[6].

Sustainable development was defined in the World Commission on Environment and Development Report 1987, *Our Common Future*, as:

> "Sustainable development is development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

There has generally been a recognition of three aspects of sustainable development: *Economic, Environmental* and *Social*. From the point of view of neoclassical economic theory, sustainability can be defined in terms of the maximization of welfare over time. From an ecological perspective, sustainability must involve limits on population and consumption levels, applied to all biological systems. Clearly, an integration of economics and ecology is required, and this can only be achieved with the assistance of the third element of the sustainability triad the social, which is necessary to achieve the economic and ecological components.

The principles of sustainable development (Csaba and Nikolett, 2008 as cited in **Dewane, 2011)**[5] are: the principles of a holistic approach, intra-generational and inter-generational solidarity, social justice, sustainable management of resources, integration, utilising local resources, public participation, social responsibility, precaution and prevention and the "polluter pays" principle. Haughton (1999) has usefully summarized the ideas of sustainable development in five principles based on equity: *futurity* inter-generational equity; *social justice* intra-generational equity; *trans-frontier responsibility* geographical equity; *procedural equity* people treated openly and fairly; and *interspecies equity* the importance of biodiversity. These principles help give clarity to the ideas of sustainable development, link human equity to the environment, challenge blander and meaningless interpretations, and provide a useful basis for an evaluation of the different trends in sustainable development (Hopwood, Mellor and Brien, 2005)[11].

Among the principles of sustainable development, the principles of holistic approach, social justice, sustainable management of resources, integration, utilising local resources, public participation, social responsibility, precaution and prevention are most related to community social work.

Sustainable Communities

A sustainable community is one that is economically, environmentally, and socially healthy and resilient. It meets challenges through

integrated solutions rather than through fragmented approaches that meet one of those goals at the expense of the others. And it takes a long-term perspective one that's focused on both the present and future, well beyond the next budget or election cycle. A sustainable community's success depends upon its members' commitment and involvement through:

- Active, organized, and informed citizenship,

- Inspiring, effective, and responsive leadership, and

- Responsible, caring, and healthy community institutions, services, and businesses.

As a result, a sustainable community manages its human, natural, and financial resources to meet current needs while ensuring that adequate resources are equitably available for future generations. It seeks:

- A better quality of life,

- A better quality of life for the whole community without compromising the wellbeing of other communities,

- Healthy ecosystems,

- Effective governance supported by meaningful and broad-based citizen participation, and

- Economic security (Institute for Sustainable Communities, 1997)[26.]

The following features are attributed to sustainable communities (http://www.starcommunities.org/education/principles/)[31]:

- Take a systems perspective and recognize that people, nature, and the economy are all affected by their actions,

- Possess a strong capacity to respond to and bounce back from adversity,

- Capture opportunities and respond to challenges,

- Measure progress by improvements in the health and wellbeing of their people, environment, and economy,

- Steward natural resources so that future generations have as many opportunities available to them as we do today. They also

recognize that resources exist for the benefit of life forms other than humans,

- Engage all facets of society in working together for the benefit of the whole,

- Allocate resources and opportunities fairly so that all people who do the full range of jobs that a community needs can thrive in it,

- Celebrate and foster ethnic, cultural, economic, and biological diversity and encourage multiple approaches to accomplish a goal,

- Provide leadership through action and results, and

- Engage in continuous discovery, rediscovery, and invention as they learn more about the impacts of their actions.

Sustainable Development Goals

The global community at the United Nations on September 25, 2015 agreed to the 2030 Global Agenda entitled *'Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'*. This action plan, which replaces the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), is universal in nature and comprehensive in the range of issues and concerns addressed pertaining to development, economy, human rights and the environment. The theme of *'no one will be left behind'* is most critical so as to ensure that inclusive development is within the reach of all people groups and communities.

The 2030 SDG Agenda has five areas of critical importance, which can be referred to as the *five Ps*. These are *people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnerships*. The first P is People, and is at the heart of development to promote human dignity and the well-being of all, combat inequalities, end poverty, and aim for gender equality. The second P is Planet, and champions combating climate change, promoting the sustainable use of the earth's resources and sustainable patterns of consumption and production. The third P, Prosperity, specifically focuses on inclusive and sustainable economic growth. The fourth P, Peace, promotes a life free from fear, coercion and violence, access to justice and human rights for all. The final P, Partnership, calls for global solidarity and a people-centred approach

to development. All these are at the heart of social work theory and practice, as can be seen by the IFSW/IASSW definition of social work (Jayasooria, 2016)[14].

The 2030 Global Transformation Agenda has 17 goals, 169 specific targets and 230 indicators. The paper focus on Goal 11, i.e., make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable; in particular, on the specific target 11.4, i.e., strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage.

Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development

The International Federation of Social Workers, the International Association of Schools of Social Work, and the International Council on Social Welfare, jointly initiated a global agenda between 2012 and 2016 (IFSW 2014). In 2010 in Hong Kong, an extensive consultative process began at a joint conference and culminated in specific commitments to action. A joint publication entitled *The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development Commitment to Action'* was developed.

In this exercise, the three global organisations agreed to support the UN in the preparation of the post-2015 development agenda. At the global campaign level, the three global organisations agreed to undertake five strategies:

- Promote social and economic equalities,
- Ensure the dignity and worth of persons,
- Promote sustainable communities and environmentally-sensitive development,
- Promote well-being through sustainable human relationships, and
- Ensure an appropriate environment for practice and education.

The organisations jointly stated 'we would strive with others for a people-focused global economy that is regulated to protect and promote social justice, human rights and sustainable development' (IFSW 2014, p 3). They also pledged that their organisations will 'promote education and practice standards in social work and social

development that enable workers to facilitate sustainable social development outcomes' (IFSW 2014, p 3) (Jayasooria, 2016)[14].

The paper is related to the third strategy of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, i.e., promoting sustainable communities and environmentally-sensitive development.

Theoretical Background

There are many theories, approaches and models of practice in social work which relate to the various dimensions of sustainability. Among those, the paper draws from the following:

Theories

- *The Community Development Theory*: Community development is fundamentally about the 'improvement' of the 'community'. The community development theory is the most practical framework for social workers seeking lasting change for individuals and the communities and societies in which they live (Tan, 2009)[23]. Gamble and Weil (1997) and Gorobets (2006) put the notion of sustainable development at the core of the community development theory (Zapf, 2010)[32].

- *The Eco-Development Theory* seeks sustainable development that does not encroach upon natural resources (Estes, 1993 as cited in Payne, 2014)[19].

- *The Social Development Theory,* which advocates sustainability that proposes forms of economic and physical development that nurture human welfare through decentralization and democratization (Lusk and Hoff, 1994 as cited in Payne, 2014)[19].

Approaches

- *Eco-Social Work:* Coates (2003) offers a well-worked out ecological approach to social work, focused on sustainable development in all societies. The main approaches to eco-social work include promoting the positive use of natural resources and self-consciousness about lifestyles respectful of environmental resources; and concern for the social environment (Payne, 2014)[19].

- *Green Social Work,* developed by Dominelli (2012) and Payne (2014)[19], is 'a form of holistic professional social work practice that focuses on the: interdependencies amongst people; the social organisation of relationships between people and the flora and fauna in their physical habitats; and the interactions between socio-economic and physical environmental crises and interpersonal behaviours that undermine the well-being of human beings and planet earth. It proposes to address these issues by arguing for a profound transformation in how people conceptualise the social basis of their society, their relationships with each other, living things and the inanimate world' (Dominelli, 2012: p. 25).

- *Conservation Social Work* provides a unifying and global approach for addressing problems centering on human-animal, human-nature, and human-human interactions with the vision of promoting well-being for humans, animals, and nature alike (Dewane, 2011)[5.]

Models

- *The Social-Ecological Practice Model* is centred on the concepts of empowerment, social capital formation, and resilience building (Peeters, 2012)[20.]

- *The Life Model of Social Work Practice* was introduced in 1980 and updated in 2008, the purpose of which, as explained by Gitterman and Germain (2008), is to improve the level of fit between people and their environments, especially between human needs and environmental resources … to influence social and physical environmental forces to be responsive to people's needs. The Life Model asserts a "rebound" effect - that what we do has a ripple effect which, in turn, rebounds to affect us (**Dewane, 2011**)[5].

Building Sustainable Communities through Community Social Work

Hoff and McNutt (1994) argued that social work will have to move beyond outdated goals of individual well-being and social welfare to adopt new models geared more towards sustainability. This position

received strong support in a subsequent policy statement from the National Association of Social Workers (2000**):**

> The compatibility of sustainable development and the person-in-environment perspective is a firm theoretical foundation from which to apply macro-level social work practice to person-natural environment problems (Zapf, 2010: p.105)[32].

Social workers must think differently about sustainability, with more community-focused action. Community social work relies on all the methods of social work in the context of the community, with active community participation for the effective functioning of communities. Thus, community social work is a dimension of professional social work practice, applicable to all the fields of social work including sustainable development, where communities are the setting for interventions. Accordingly, community social work applies social work knowledge, skills, attitudes and values; and adopts social work philosophy and methods to build sustainable communities.

A sustainable community resembles a living system in which human, natural and economic elements are interdependent and draw strength from each other (https://www.sfu.ca/cscd/about-us/what-is-sustainable-community-development.html)[13]. For a positive process of sustainable development, change-oriented eco-social interventions are needed, and that means both preparing people for change, and participating in change. Work with individual clients and families can be attached to networking and community building. Such a bottom-up approach should be supported by interventions at the macro level (Peeters, 2011)[22]. From this perspective, community social work can build sustainable communities through:

- benefitting communities in planning and working toward environmental, economic, and social sustainability,

- providing leadership and organizational assistance to community groups interested in establishing cooperatives, social enterprises and social or solidarity economies,

- strengthening people's capacity to engage with crises, thus contributing to their resilience,

- creating contexts that bring people together and build networks,

- helping local communities network with others to develop social, cultural, and economic resources, and

- contributing to social capital formation, focusing on empowerment in cooperation with other social factors.

In the context of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, Lombard (2015)[16] argues that social work must bridge micro and macro practice in a more focused way by integrating the personal with the political in social work interventions and policy development. Community social work is relevant here as it works through individuals and groups for the wider benefit of the community, and, hence, incorporates micro, meso and macro practices.

In comparing normative principles, Peeters (2012A) proposes that social work and sustainable development practice have comparatively similar principles, except for social work's failure to broaden the definition of a person's environment to encompass ecological as well as social concerns. Recognizing the critical need for social work to engage in effective sustainable development for several decades, Estes (1993) elaborated on the theories, drawn from a range of disciplines, which supported social-work practice in the arena of sustainable development. He based a set of strategies for sustainable development on building group and individual empowerment, conflict resolution, community building, institution building, and national/regional/world building, outlining ways in which social workers could engage at all of these levels. Peeters (2012B) believes the appropriate role of social work is to develop empowerment, social capital, and resilience at the micro and macro levels of intervention for a socially just and environmentally sustainable society. These activities resonate with Estes' strategies of sustainable social, economic, and environmental development, further expanded by Gamble and Hoff (2012). Gamble and Hoff also identify a range of skills necessary for sustainable development, including the following:

- Participatory engagement techniques that ensure the involvement of local participants in assessment, priority setting, action strategies, and evaluation protocols for sustainable goals;

- Training and experience to increase the leadership and organizational capacity of community members as they engage with the complexity of social, economic, and environmental linkages, thereby building social capital within their community;

- Collaborative and inter-sectoral planning in the recognition that complex problems require multidisciplinary teams with many different skills and knowledge; and

- The development and use of sustainable community indicators that measure well-being on a range of community-identified indicators, not on GDP (adapted from Gamble & Hoff, 2012, pp. 222227) (Gamble, 2013)[8.]

All of these strategies and skills of sustainable development are congruent with the attributes of community social work, namely: localization; collaboration and partnership; team work; collective responsibility; community participation; work with formal and informal local networks and networking; empowerment; identification, mobilization and utilization of community resources; decentralization of power; integration of social services; proactive and preventative in nature; emphasis on mutual aid and self-help; simultaneous emphasis on community and the individuals and groups within communities; administrative aspects; and dialogue (Mini and Sathyamurthi, 2017)[17.]

Community social work practice has historically been characterized by its embrace of social justice values (Delgado, 2011)[4] which correlates with the vision of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development to contribute to a 'more just society' and with the theme 'no one will be left behind' of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The terms mentioned in the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, such as 'radical struggles for social change' and 'agents of transformation', as well as the title of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development 'transforming the world'(Lombard, 2015)[16] are in line with the community social work value of 'modifying or changing the system rather than simply adapting to it' (Hadley et al., 1987)[9].

Hence, building sustainable communities through community social work can have a pivotal role in sustainable development. This can be conceptualized and represented as in Fig. 1:
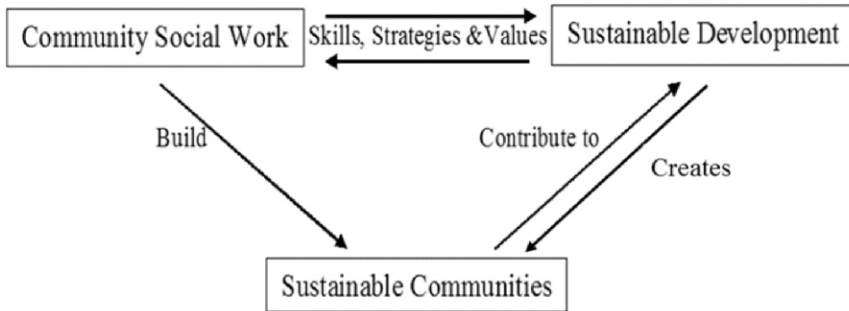

Fig.1: Sustainable Development through Community Social Work

CAUTION: That should rightly read as follows: Build /

Contribute to / Create OR Builds / Contributes to / Creates

Thus, community social work which is congruent with sustainable development in terms of strategies, skills and values can build sustainable communities. These, in turn, will contribute to sustainable development**.**

Conclusion

The term "sustainable development" was coined to describe a new way of development that would be holistic, integrating social, economic, and environmental concerns (Gamble, 2013)[8]. The path to sustainability is different for every community but the common elements are a healthy environment, a strong economy and the well-being of the people living in the community (http://www. starcommunities.org/about/)[31]. Social work's focus on the 'social' can reinforce the social dimension and participative practices of sustainable development (Gamble & Hoff, forthcoming; Peeters, 2010b, 2011ab as cited in Peeters, 2011)[22]. 'Social' is about the community, which is the context of community social work with participation as one of its fundamental strategies. Community social work makes social work discernible from other sciences because of its focus on the great social issues of society and on environmental factors

(Koutra, n.d.)[15]. Thus, to ensure the holistic nature of sustainable development, building sustainable communities through community social work is vital. The congruency of community social work with sustainable development recalls social work practice emphasizing the five Ps of the SDG Agenda: people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnerships. This sustainable development perspective of community social work can boost social work interventions towards sustainability.

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