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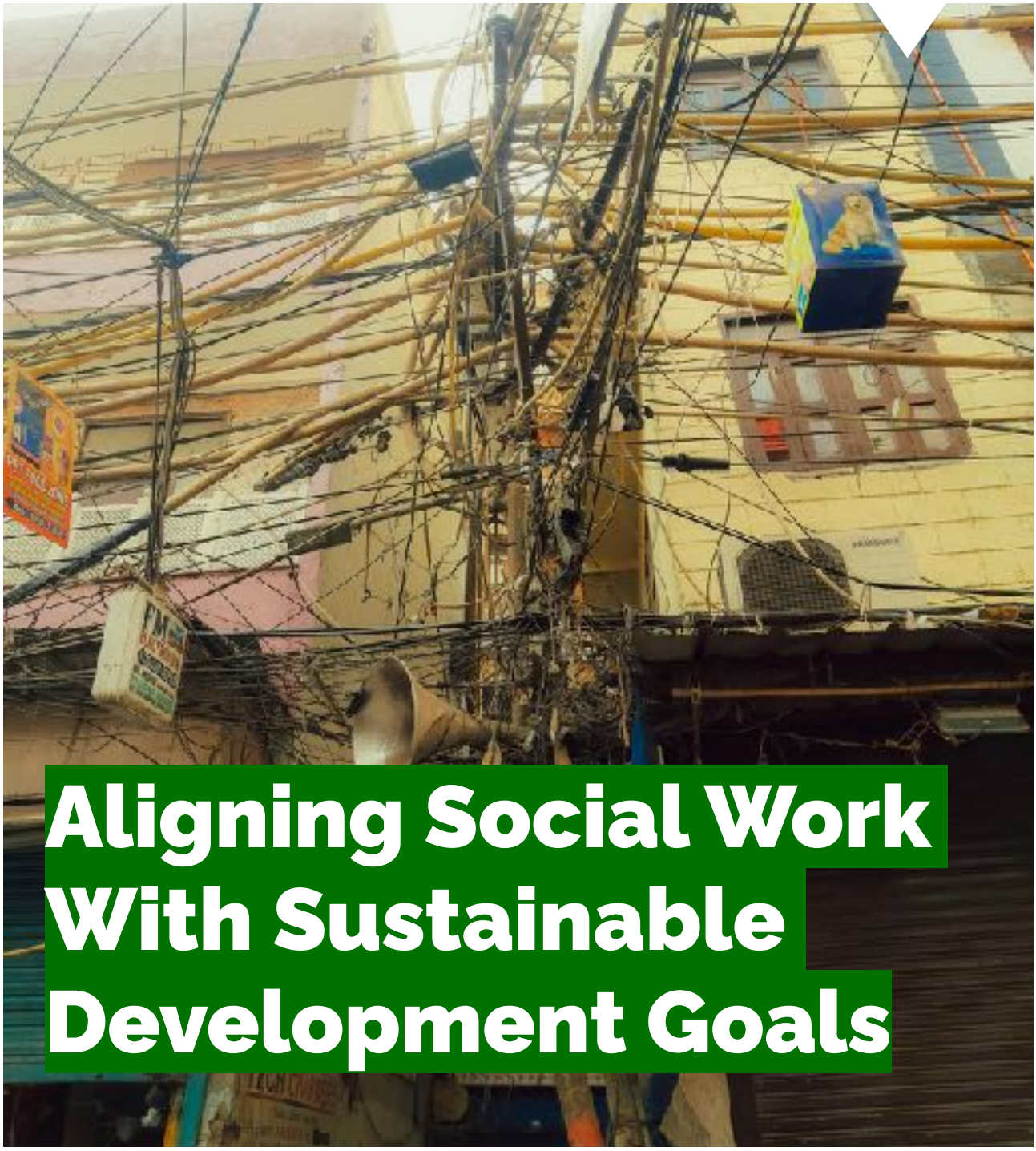

Aligning Social Work With Sustainable Development Goals

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Editor-in-chief
Carolyn Noble, PhD

Editorial:

Social work unequivocally supports the United Nations Agenda 2030 Social Development Goals (SDGs) see Social Work and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - International Federation of Social Workers (ifsw.org) and The Routledge International Handbook of Social Development, Social Work, and the Sustainable Development Goals - International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (iassw-aiets.org)

As a first, over 193 nations came together to map a global agenda that links economic, social and ecological concerns for the present and future generations with regard to sustainable livelihoods, poverty reduction, education, climate change, disaster risk management, gender and cultural equity and addressing income disparities across the globe. The aim of this global initiative is to foster sustainable development for the overall betterment of humanity and the planet (that's got to be a good thing, YES!).

The 17 SDGs can be clearly linked to social works' pedagogical, academic, and community endeavours and initiatives as articles in this special edition demonstrate. Contributors from India, Malaysia, Germany, Spain, The Kingdom of Eswatini, Zimbabwe, Kyrgyzstan, USA and Indigenous Australia exemplify how social work is contributing to this vision for economic, social and environmental justice locally as well as internationally. In having a whole issue devoted to the linkage between social work's continuing support for achieving these goals by 2030 we see that social work continues to place itself as a key international social policy and practice professional. As many governments are struggling to enact these goals, we see from this edition that social work academics, students, and practitioners are already taking an active role.

We thank Dr Sheeja Karalam for guest editing this 28th edition and send Professor Annamaria Campanini best wishes for the future as she finishes her terms as IASSW's President. She has given so much to social work in her outstanding leadership over the last 8 years and her support for this magazine realises two of IASSWs key commitments to engage with social work educators in international exchange of information and expertise and to foster ecological, social and economic justice.

Enjoy!

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Social Work Student's Engagement to Execute the Sustainable Development Goal Missions through Social Work Education and Social Work Practice

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the comprehensive 2030 agenda established by the United Nations with the aim of fostering sustainable development for the betterment of humanity and the preservation of our planet; objectives are geared towards promoting peace, prosperity, and sustainability for present and future generations (United Nations, 2015). Social work educators and social work practitioners deliberate the potential implementation of all 17 SDGs in the social work context.

National Association of Social Workers (2023), enumerated the following types of social work: administration and management, advocacy and community organising, ageing, child welfare, developmental disabilities, healthcare, international social work, justice and corrections, mental health and clinical social work, mental health and substance abuse, occupational and employee assistance program, policy and planning, politics, public welfare, research, and school social work. As enumerated, there are gaps in which some SDGs are absent. Nevertheless, this endeavour may be accomplished by means of collaborative efforts

and strategic alliances. Referring to SDG1 through SDG17, most SDGs (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11, 16, and 17) are ongoing in social work. Only SDGs 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, and 15 may be utilised less frequently in social work practice.

In relation to the research conducted in selected countries concerning the comprehension of college students in Malaysia regarding SDGs, it has been observed that they possessed a high level of knowledge and exhibited positive attitudes towards SDGs. However, their practical implementation of the SDGs remained subpar (Afroz & Ilham, 2020). 74.4% of the students expressed optimism about the attainment of SDGs by the year 2030 (Ghazi et al., 2020). In Spain, it has been reported that 15.9% of college students have demonstrated an awareness of the SDGs (Leiva-Brondo et al., 2022).

Furthermore, 44.36% of students in Jordan exhibited a commendable level of comprehension pertaining to the SDGs (Alomari & Kataybeh, 2021). According to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2009; p.6), despite the resources available in a wealthier country, "many young people leave school with no useful qualifications and some choose to drop out since what is taught is irrelevant to their lives". "Education is key in achieving all SDGs where aspects of education is in relationship with gender equality (SDG 5), climate change (SDG 13) focusing on linkages monitoring and professional capacity development, including through partnerships (SDG 17)" (UNESCO, 2020; p.312). This demonstrates that a heightened emphasis on the quality of education holds the potential to facilitate the attainment of more SDGs.

The SDGs were officially adopted in the year 2015. According to Jayasooria (2016), a conspicuous disregard for environmental and sustainability considerations has been observed within the Malaysian context. However, it is noteworthy to acknowledge the commendable endeavours undertaken by human rights advocates, development practitioners, and environmental activists, particularly those actively engaged in advancing indigenous communities, as they have consistently championed the interests of community development and social equity. All prospects are subjected to meticulous scrutiny in order to execute the missions of the SDGs effectively.

At the institution of higher learning where I am currently employed, there is a significant emphasis on the SDGs across every discipline, particularly concerning the pedagogical endeavours, academic activities and community initiatives undertaken by the staff. Since 2019, it has been mandated that all academicians adhere to the inclusion of SDG elements within their work. It is vital to denote a minimum of one SDG, or potentially multiple, within the course's learning objectives and units. Furthermore, it is crucial to establish a correlation between research grants and community projects with a minimum of one SDG. In this manner, it is ensured that the entirety of the academic personnel within the university is duly mindful of the SDGs and, in unison, contribute towards achieving all of the constituent components of SDGs. The transfer of knowledge and awareness about the SDGs occurs indirectly, in which students and local communities receive such information.

Social work education for SDGs in tertiary education context

The SDGs may be incorporated into social work education (SWE). In order to prepare them for social work practice (SWP) and their prospective prospects as social work students, it is crucial that they are aware of global and local issues. Among the potential approaches are:

Assessment: Students are able to establish a connection between their assessment report and one or more SDGs, elucidating how their assessment, report, or reflection can potentially contribute to the SDGs' objectives. This approach would assist students in comprehending each of the SDGs and enable them to align these goals with their assessments.

Global classroom: To achieve this, for example, the author has previously conducted an online global classroom for final-year social work students enrolled in the Social Policy Analysis and Planning course. One of the learning units is the Major Social Policy, encompassing education, health, social security, and housing. The author contacted and communicated with social work educators from Iran and Pakistan to deliver online lectures via Zoom platform pertaining to the four significant policies for students in Malaysia, Iran, and Pakistan. Concurrently, this fostered students' understanding regarding the disparity of social policies across three countries, as well as partnerships among universities on a global scale, intending to nurture the education of future social workers. The purpose of this endeavour is to achieve SDG4, SDG16 and SDG17.

Student online forum or discussion: Students could conduct online forums or discussions with welfare agencies in order to acquire knowledge and information. In conjunction with World Social Work Day this year, the social work student association in my university conducted an online forum with all social work representatives from six universities. They discussed numerous issues related to SDG1, SDG3, SDG4, SDG5, SDG10, SDG11, SDG16, and SDG17. Moreover, IASSW (2021) identified a paradigm shift in SWE through flexible learning, group discussion using online messaging, and fieldwork online supervision.

Research findings in journal articles or online magazines: In addition to students, social work educators share research and findings in comparable journal articles and online magazines. Therefore, social work educators and practitioners should collaborate to produce research inform practice or practice inform research. The attainment of more SDGs holds the potential for further progress in addressing global challenges.

Courses and training: SWE serves social work educators, students, and social service practitioners. Educators in the field of social work conduct online and physical courses and training for social service practitioners, such as welfare officers and social workers.

Online group chat: Malaysian social work educators participate in an online group conversation to discuss social work education at the university. This online discussion has

brought together nine public and private universities and colleges that offer social work studies.

Social work practice for SDGs in tertiary education context

Prior to graduating, social work students are required to complete hours of social work practice. SDGs could also be incorporated into social work student practice.

Casework and groupwork in student fieldwork practice: Students are exposed to practicum practice for both case work and group work under the supervision of social work educators and agency administrators because they have studied casework and group work in the classroom. Aside from that, for group projects, students should organise community service projects with social work students and students from other academic disciplines or faculties.

Action research: Due to the fact that social work is a practice-based profession, social work educators should conduct more discipline-wide action research. For instance, by conducting research, the community may express concern about SDG8, SDG9, or SDG12. Social workers' knowledge on this subject may be limited; therefore, social workers can serve as mediators to address community concerns. According to the IASSW (2019), direct practice training frequently overlooks policy, research, and community development skills.

Way forward for social work in incorporating SDGs mission and conclusion

Incorporating digitalisation and technology into social work education and practice is essential. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the tertiary level of education has undergone significant change. Currently, teaching and learning are aligned with technological advancement. There are more online courses and workshops available. I have researched my second- and final-year social work students to determine their preferred teaching and learning methods after almost two years of studying exclusively online. After nearly two years of exclusively online learning, 147 social work students reported that they preferred hybrid (online and physical class) learning (57%), physical class (32%), and exclusively online (12%) (Azhar, 2022). Social work students interested in pursuing professions in this field should be exposed to practice and skills, considering the majority of online social work courses do not expose students to actual client interactions (Azhar, 2022).

Furthermore, pupils in rural and remote areas must not be neglected, as this will result in a digital divide and social exclusion. The digital divide exacerbates social exclusion for employment, education, health, social services, and socioeconomic development, according to Molala and Makhubele (2021). Social workers with knowledge of the role of the digital divide in social exclusion are therefore expected to advocate actively for Information Communication Policies (Molala & Makhubele, 2021).

It is anticipated that 17 SDGs will be achieved by 2030, with seven years remaining. Numerous obstacles, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have been encountered; however, the SDGs have persisted in their pursuit of implementation. What does the future hold for SWE and SWP? By effectively bridging the gaps between transdisciplinary education, research, and practices, a more significant number of SDGs could be attained through SWE and SWP. According to the International Federation of Social Workers (2017), the emergence of eco-social work, green social work, or ecological social work has introduced a novel paradigm that extends beyond the exclusive focus on humans. As a matter of fact, social work should transcend the boundaries of humanism. Nonetheless, it is essential to emphasise the significance of SDG16 and SDG17 to foster a collective and symbiotic engagement between public, private, and international entities even after 2030.

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