CORE MESSAGES

EUROPEAN **SOCIAL WORK** *CONFERENCE*

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strong social work

Flemish Platform Strong Social Work

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The DNA of strong social work in Europe

Social work is performed in virtually all EU member states, and it comes in a variety of guises across Europe. Social workers can for instance be found in the department of social security and of social services, in civil society, in social dialogue platforms, in poverty alleviation, and in many other sectors.

This is partly due to how the welfare state was designed in the different member states, and how civil society developed over the course of the twentieth century. Numerous social work practices evolved from citizens' initiatives or were part of a broader emancipation movement, and were subsequently scaled up and, in time, financed by public authorities.

Social workers therefore operate in a wide range of sectors and settings, certainly when viewed from a European perspective. Yet, despite the diversity, there is much to be found in common. This commonality is summed up in the global definition of social work:

"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels."

Social workers are committed daily to initiating social change that can contribute to a more just and fair society, in which human rights serve as a moral compass. On the one hand, social work practices attempt to realise rights at the individual and group level by informing and assisting people to access rights. Human rights also have social-political significance, however. They challenge social workers to reflect on those whose rights are not realised and on how we can shape a sustainable, solidary, inclusive and democratic society.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was formulated in 1948, stating that the "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world". The UDHR not only sets out civil and political rights, but also social, economic and cultural rights (which are stipulated in Article 23 of the Belgian Constitution) and the so-called collective rights, which include the right to a healthy living environment and sustainable development. As such, human rights also serve at the starting point and yardstick of Strong Social Work.

In Flanders in 2018, the human rights approach was translated into five key principles for Strong Social Work: politicising work, proximity, process logic, generalist practice, and working in a connecting way. These five building blocks are inseparably connected. They offer a means to grasp the work performed by social workers in all its diversity, and to further flesh out social work practices.

In response to a request by social workers, the element of politicising work has received particular attention in Flanders in recent years. Social workers see politicising work as one of the core aspects of their work, but also point out that there is not necessarily much support for this.

Politicisation, in the widest sense, concerns social work practices that contribute to the public debate about the kind of society we wish to build. Since the demand for more justice and equality is inherently normative, it can never be definitively determined whether and how justice and equality have been realised. It is therefore essential that social workers continually strive to publicly address social and societal issues through various channels and strategies and at various points in time. Specifically, this can concern (1) making social needs and injustices publicly visible; (2) facilitating people's participation in public policy processes in order to bring the voice of unheard groups to attention; (3) challenging society to find structural solutions to societal challenges; (4) amplifying the voice of people in vulnerable positions; and (5) creating work practices that demonstrate how things can be done differently and better.

"Working on human rights requires time and the sustained, long-term effort by a plurality of social workers and social work organisations."

Working on human rights hence requires time and the sustained, long-term effort by a plurality of social workers and social work organisations, and by public authorities that offer room for and appreciate the critical role of social work, and are open to strengthening the democratic character of European societies.

2 European policy context: the EU as an ally in the realisation and safeguarding of rights

At the European level, a number of important decisions have been taken in the past 15 years with a view to realising human rights.

The 'Charter of Fundamental Rights' took effect in 2009, which is a legally binding document that describes the main personal freedoms and rights to which every inhabitant of the EU is entitled.

Another important milestone is the 'European Pillar of Social Rights', proclaimed at the 2017 Göteborg summit by the European Parliament, Council and Commission. This 'pillar' describes twenty core principles that serve as guidelines leading the EU to a strong social Europe, including equal opportunities, labour market access, fair employment conditions, social protection, protection against poverty, and inclusion. In its Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Commission proposes specific initiatives aimed at realising this goal. The implementation of the plan is a joint task for the EU institutions, national, regional and local authorities, the social partners and civil society.

In 2019 the EU launched its Green Deal aimed at three targets: (1) no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050, (2) economic growth decoupled from resource use, (3) no person and no place left behind. The Green Deal is thus explicitly committed to combining an ecological, economic and social agenda.

In the new European digital agenda for 2020-2030, the EU responds to a number of recent digital developments. The priorities are to create safe digital spaces, to safeguard fair competition on digital markets, and to strengthen Europe's digital sovereignty and to make climate neutrality by 2050 a part of the digital agenda.

"Social workers have a vital role in achieving these ambitious policy targets."

In April 2024, under the Belgian presidency, the EU once again expresses its ambition to realise a Social Europe. At the conference in Terhulpen, the European Parliament, the European Commission, Belgium on behalf of 25 EU Member States, the European Economic and Social Committee, ETUC, SGI Europe, SME United and the Social Platform signed a declaration on the future of the European Pillar of Social Rights. These actors commit to continue the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and strengthen Social Europe.

The ultimate goal of the Terhulpen conference in April 2024 is to adopt an inter-institutional declaration signed by the EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament and European Council), the social partners and civil society. The purpose of the declaration is to prepare the prospective social agenda for the 2024-2029 agenda and to reaffirm the European Pillar of Social Rights as the compass for the EU's social policy in the years ahead.

Social workers have a vital role in achieving these ambitious policy targets. A considerable number of social workers are active in social services, in social protection systems, in social dialogue, and are committed to strengthening the democratic character of and social cohesion within European societies. They do so using various practices associated with the classic division of types of social interventions practiced by social workers: casework, group work, community work and policy practice. The European Social Work Conference aims to highlight their vital work in addressing and tackling crucial societal issues. At the same time, the conference wishes to underline the importance of allowing social work sufficient autonomy and room to act in order to fulfil its core task.

3 A challenging societal context

At the same time, today's European societies are faced with uncertainty and numerous complex societal challenges. Worldwide inflation is putting markets under pressure and driving up prices for consumers, which is a source of social unrest.

Geopolitically, too, the world is in upheaval. There are conflicts and tensions within and between countries, spread across the world and since recently nearby as well, in Ukraine and Gaza, resulting in humanitarian crises. The ideal of an open, global and democratic world is under pressure with the rise of autocracies, protectionism and extreme forms of nationalism. Polarisation is emerging along various societal fault lines. In addition to tensions based on cultural identity, we see tensions based on (extreme) opinions and on socio-economic gaps.

Although digital media in itself does not promote polarisation, the algorithms, speed and reach of social media can be a contributing factor. Digitalisation and social media do offer countless opportunities worldwide, but also put public authorities and international cooperative relationships on edge in the fight against fake news, cybercrime, the information war, and unfair trading practices. The gap between the Global North and Global South goes hand in hand with different interests and priorities in international negotiations, and has made 'decolonisation' an increasingly pertinent matter on the European agenda.

There are at least six processes that are putting the stability and resilience of our planet under pressure: global warming, loss of biodiversity, the freshwater cycle, biochemical cycles (nitrogen and phosphorous), land use and chemical pollution (e.g. by plastics, radio-active substances and heavy metals). The increasing demand for and exploitation of raw materials is posing economic, ecological and societal challenges, and is contributing to the shifting power relations worldwide.

To keep the planet inhabitable, we need to achieve carbon neutrality (zero emissions) and at the same must learn to adapt to different climate conditions. We are facing a drastic transition to a greener, smarter and more efficient energy production and use. This cannot be achieved without lifestyle changes. This transition must also not reinforce existing or create new exclusion mechanisms.

In social respects across Europe, in 2022 some 95.3 million people were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This amounts to approximately one in five of the entire European population. At the same time, the whole world is currently undergoing a demographic transition. By 2050, the proportion of people aged 65 and over will come to around 30% in the EU, up from 20% today. The ethnic-cultural diversity of European societies has also increased substantially in the past 30 years.

Despite these social issues, there is less support for income redistribution, and welfare chauvinism is on the rise – that is, the belief that social provisions are only meant for a country's 'own population'. Social policy is thereby subjected to inclusion and exclusion processes concerning people with a migration background.

4 'Grand societal challenges' for social work: migration, climate change and digitalisation

These major societal issues not only pose significant challenges for policy makers and politicians, but also affect social workers' daily practice. Precisely because social workers work with and between people on the basis of proximity and a life-world approach, they are confronted with these issues in their daily practice and contribute to new ways of responding to these global changes. This can be clarified with a few examples:

- International conflicts as well as fake news have a strong impact on what happens daily at youth work initiatives.
- Social workers that are involved in poverty alleviation are confronted with policy measures relating to climate change that are not accessible for people living in poverty.
- The increasing transition to online service provision means that a growing number of people in socially vulnerable positions can no longer get access to support.
- The consequences of inflation, also referred to as the 'cost of living crisis', strongly affect the expenditure patterns of people living in poverty.

Based on an intensive preparatory process involving social workers, social work training programmes, academics, and civil society organisations at both Flemish and European levels, three key societal challenges have been selected for the European Social Work Conference. These are challenges that social workers encounter every day and to which they respond in their own work practices.

"These challenges demand transnational social work that encourages European collaboration and the sharing of expertise."

We chose these three challenges precisely because they are not limited to any particular EU member states and because they are of a global nature. These three challenges were chosen precisely, because they demand transnational social work that encourages European collaboration and the sharing of expertise, and that builds coalitions to reinforce the societal position of social work and to support social work's contribution to tackling these issues.

5 Social work and climate change

Climate change is not the only manifestation of the ecological crisis, but it does require a sustained effort to lessen climate change and to mitigate its negative effects. Accordingly, there is a steadily growing realisation that good climate policy per definition implies good social policy.

"Climate change threatens to create new forms of social inequality."

Climate change threatens to create new forms of social inequality, as vulnerable groups have less resources to adjust to changing life circumstances, because they are more readily victimised by the negative impact of climate change, and because their voices are not always heard in the democratic debate on the design and pursuit of climate policies.

Role and contribution of social work:

- Countering ecological inequality: advocating socially just climate measures, for instance by giving a voice to people in vulnerable situations.
- Climate policy is also an opportunity to achieve positive impact in the social domain (for instance more pleasant cities to live in, lower energy bills, higher quality of social housing, etc.).
- The application of existing methods on new climate-related themes:
  - Developing new practices in the area of 'disaster management', focusing on rebuilding (local) communities after climate disasters.
  - Contributing to the social debate on climate policy with the voices of people in vulnerable situations.
  - Exploring and realising rights in new areas, such as access to home renovation premiums.
- Making visible existing practices that already combine social and ecological goals, and upscaling them.
- Developing or supporting practices that contribute to the transition to a sustainable society, such as new forms of collective and green mobility, circular economy, domestic living, and other practices that contribute to a sustainable food and water strategy.
- Contributing to coalition building around the need to connect ecological and social goals, and to new forms of collaboration to support the transition.
- Increasing the sense of urgency among social professionals, organisations and policy makers through vision development, training and education.

6 Social work and digitalisation

Digitalisation is here to stay in our societies, and it offers no end of possibilities to stay in touch with each other, to quickly collect information, to form new communities, and to facilitate connections between people. In social work as well, digitalisation offers lots of opportunities to reach people, to provide support, and to foster connection and social cohesion. At the same time, not everybody can keep up. Policy needs to focus on digital inclusion and to create the necessary conditions for that.

This involves (1) access to hardware/software/internet; (2) digital competencies; (3) having access to a support network that can help with the use of digital resources; (4) inclusion by design (talking with users, not about users).

Digitalisation also tends to be treated too easily as an alternative to the classic forms of service provision. Here, the click-call-connect principle should be observed: (1) Click: it is important that a website/tool/app is easy to use; (2) Call: it is important to offer a free telephone line to call, with simple menus and short waiting times; (3) Connect: there is a need for accessible physical places that people can go to. Privacy, protection and professional confidentiality are also important principles that should be considered closely in digitalisation processes involving social workers.

Digitalisation affects numerous aspects of social work practices, as the following three examples show. First, the automation of the process of granting social rights is increasing strongly in a number of EU member states. As a result, access to social rights is made very much easier and the non-use of social rights is decreasing, and it also diminishes the administrative burden for social workers.

"Access to social rights is made very much easier and the non-use of social rights is decreasing."

At the same time, automation significantly changes the social worker's role, since information is provided to the worker through digital channels and no longer by the person concerned. This also affects the social worker's tasks, as the information no longer needs to be verified with the person concerned. Second, we are seeing an increasing trend towards digital working and blended working. This poses the question how to connect effectively to people's digital life-world (children and adolescents) and to create digital proximity there as well. A third example is how online media impact daily activities in social work.

Role and contribution of social work:

- From its signalling and politicisation role, to alert both policy makers and other (commercial) service providers to the inaccessibility of rights and services.
- Digital inclusion is not by definition one of social work's core tasks. Social workers should not take over the responsibility of other service providers and overburden themselves as a result, but social work can take on an important role in enabling digital inclusion by engaging with the four dimensions of digital inclusion.
- Utilising the opportunities offered by digitalisation and blended working to reach and support people, and to fulfil a connecting role.
- Remaining alert to the negative consequences of digitalisation and social media (e.g. the impact on mental well-being, preserving professional confidentiality and privacy).
- Mapping out the implications of AI and robotisation for the role and position of social work and preparing for these consequences.

7 Social work and migration

Migration is a specific societal challenge that comes in different forms. It includes (1) the right to request asylum, on the grounds that refugees need international protection on account of a justified fear of persecution, conflict, violence, or other circumstances that severely upset public order; (2) intra-European migration and the consequences thereof for the accessibility of social rights; (3) the precarious and sometimes inhumane conditions experienced by people with an uncertain residence status; (4) the growing super-diversity of European cities and beyond, and the effects thereof on society; (5) forms of racism and discrimination based on migration background, and respecting the rights of minorities throughout Europe (such as the Roma community); and (6) decolonisation.

Accordingly, social work is affected in many different ways by migration issues. A lot of social workers contribute to the right to asylum, are confronted in their daily practice with people having a precarious residence status, stand up against racism and discrimination, are engaged in protecting the rights of minorities, and support young unaccompanied refugees. In their daily work, social workers are also increasingly confronted with issues relating to immigration law. This implies that a familiarisation with and realisation of rights in this domain should also be strengthened. Social work organisations are also challenged to find a response to the growing ethnic-cultural diversity in society. Ethnic-cultural diversity should not be seen as a problematic issue for social work organisations, but as simply an observation and a starting point.

Role and contribution of social work:

- Social work is a human rights profession and is hence committed to the protection and realisation of the right to asylum.
- Transnational social work should be strengthened with regard to family reunification, newcomers, unaccompanied refugee minors, people without a legal residence status, Roma communities.
- Recognising informal practices set up by migrants and self-organisations that can emerge for very different reasons, sometimes to complement the existing offer, sometimes as criticism when the offer is inadequate.
- Social work has a role in contributing to building support for a super-diverse society, given social workers' specific expertise in facilitating communal life in local communities.
- Working to support diversity and inclusion necessarily implies taking a clear stance against racism and discrimination. Social work must therefore resolutely commit to a decisive approach to racism and discrimination, and also remain wary of insidious forms of exclusion resulting from a non-acknowledgement of the differences between people.