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## Internationalisation of Social Work

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### Abstract

The article explores the internationalisation of social work from a historical point of view to Indigenous approaches and discusses the concepts of indigenisation, authentication and reconceptualisation. It demonstrates the importance of shifting away from the dominant western perspective on knowledge as well as away from the idea of a universal Social Work and focuses on philosophies and approaches of the Global South. Dialogue as praxis, enablement, and empowerment as well as translation and an ethnological view as methods of internationalisation of Social Work are emphasised. Subsequently, perspectives of *Radical* as well as *Green Social Work* and postcolonial feminist approaches within the profession are presented, which can contribute to a desired interwoven, mutually supporting Social Work. The outlook shows the importance of international and cross-cultural exchange between social workers. It emphasizes on sharing of and learning about local methods and practices from other parts of the world, to develop common ideas. In this context self-reflection of the profession and social workers is crucially value.

### Keywords

International Social Work, Social Work of the South, Postcolonial Social Work

## Introduction

In the discourse on internationalisation of Social Work the following contexts play a key role: Showing the effects of colonialism, as well as subsequent conflicts and contradictions, exploitation and exclusion in post-colonial societies; the genuine political claim that the world can be changed by actors, whether these are move-

ments, organisations, governments or people in their social relationships; of central importance is the debate on Indigenous, local and “pluriversal” knowledge system based on both experience and diversity, differing from the principles of pure reason. Social Work on an international level has always involved a focussed political intention. Its particular methods are introduced here, and the issues these raise, and possible responses are considered.

In the following sections we<sup>1</sup> begin by looking at *the history of internationalisation in the field of Social Work*. We go on to address *indigenisation, authentization and reconceptualisation* – and here the challenge of ‘*Indigenous and local knowledge*’ is particularly relevant. We then consider *Philosophies of the south*, which are also significant for the thinking and world view of the Global North. After considering *practices and methods*, we discuss the importance of the international perspective of *interwoven Social Work*, which is understood as *acting locally and thinking globally*.

## History of Internationalisation of Social Work

Cross-border relationships have been inherent in Social Work from the very beginning since addressees came from other countries and therefore it also had to deal with their lifeworlds. Moreover, the spread of methods and concepts does not stop at borders. For example, the settlement movement spread from *Toynbee Hall* (London) via *Hull House* (Chicago) to other parts of the world and Saul D. Alinsky’s concept of *Community Organizing* can be found today in the community-oriented approaches of Social Work (Lutz, 2018). However Social Work has also always been linked to national security systems, with the result that professionalisation tendencies have developed in different ways (Lorenz, 2004).

In 1928, the first international Social Work conference was held in Paris, attended by over 2400 delegates from 42 countries. The conference led to the founding of today’s largest international umbrella organisations, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Council of Social Welfare (ICSW). The cooperation was interrupted during the second world war and 1956 revived, but it should also be noted here that the re-founding members of IFSW came predominantly from the Western world and country representatives from the Global South joined only gradually (Healy & Hall, 2009; Wagner & Lutz, 2018, p. 13).

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<sup>1</sup> The article has already been published in a modified form on <https://www.socialnet.de/en/international/papers/social-work-of-the-south-political-anti-colonial-environmental.html> [accessed: 02.07.2023].

Colonialism exploited people and introduced political regimes in line with colonial interests, thus weakening local decision-making and Indigenous support systems. The resulting social challenges were countered with approaches of the respective colonial powers. Social Work in the Western context was connected to social welfare institutions (Gray & Fook, 2004, p. 629) and was “transplanted almost without indigenization (...) in the belief that Social Work was an international or universal profession and was a new social technology for dealing with social problems in all societies” (Walton & Abo El Nasr, 1988a, pp. 137).

In general, international Social Work faces a three-pronged dilemma, as Mel Gray (2005) points out: Indigenisation (1), which produces new forms of Social Work, is often confronted with universalism (2), the search for common identity. However, this does not happen on neutral ground but is subject to imperialism (3), the historically grown Western dominance. It becomes apparent that Social Work is fundamentally shaped by political conditions but can also shape those in turn. In order to contribute to social justice, Social Work should abandon its colonial self-image and professional imperialism (Midgley, 1981, 1990; Gray & Fook 2004, p. 626) and always include the political dimensions. Social Work should itself contribute to its own decolonisation (Tamburro, 2013, p. 4) and should be recognised that “the physical and mental aspects of decolonization apply equally to Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities” (Gray et al., 2013, p. 323) For the decolonisation of Social Work, as for international Social Work, there is not one form but rather multitude of facets and ways which need to be explored, tried, constantly reflected, and adapted.

## **Indiginisation, authentization, reconceptualisation**

For decades, there have been calls from the Global South for another type of Social Work which adopts a completely different approach to local problems. Most of the proposals came from academic circles, but some came directly from liberation and independence movements. Escaping from the coloniality of knowledge systems, new proposals and critiques could be merged into a publicly propagated third form.

### ***Indiginisation, localisation and pluriversification***

The terms *indiginisation*, *localisation* and *pluriversification* bring together a variety of initiatives, academic debates and theoretical writings in Latin America, Asia and in Africa, adapting post-colonial Social Work to the local problems and requirements in order to establish an international perspective of Social Work. Fundamental positions are found most frequently in the literature on Social Work in

Africa (Lutz & Rehklau, 2009; Mupedziswa, 1993, 2001; Osei-Hwedie, 1996; Osei-Hwedie & Jacques, 2007; Walton & Abo El Nasr, 1988b).

This resulted in increased efforts to adapt Social Work to the requirements of the African continent and its variety of cultures and political formations. In particular, the methods of dealing with individual cases was criticised because it lacked empathy and sensibility towards the local conditions and the living conditions of “extended families” or the importance of “communities” (Mupedziswa, 1993, p. 159). Osei-Hwedie (1996, p. 217) wanted Social Work to focus on communities (village, neighbourhood, extended families, etc.) rather than on the individual subject: “In most African societies the individual is being within a societal or group context and finds character and expressions of the self within the group. (...) therefore, the focus of Social Work must be the community”.

For critical African theoreticians *indiginisation, localisation and pluriversification* referred above all to an adaptation or a *reformulation*, a process which modified imported ideas and practices, in order to bring them into harmony with the local cultural context and specific colonial experiences. Necessary reflections came to cast a new and different light on existing local knowledge (Straub, 2012). In 2014, the term “Indigenous Knowledge” was included in the definition of Social Work by *IFSW* and *IASSW*, reflecting the debate in the Global South<sup>2</sup>:

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 knowledge**, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing (Our emphasis).

### *Indigenous, local and pluriversal knowledge*

This internationally accepted definition of Social Work includes *Indigenous Knowledge* as an underpinning for activities (Kniffki, 2018; Yellow Bird, 2016). This refers to the inclusion of traditional, indigenous, local, pluriversal and communal knowledge of *Indigenous Peoples and Movements*, in particular when analysing problems and discussing action strategies in practical Social Work, but above all when working with Indigenous Communities in the Global South and also with refugees in the Global North.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/> [accessed: 17.02.2022].

<sup>3</sup> Understandably, some authors have questioned whether ‘Indigenous Knowledge’ qualifies as scientific knowledge. However, the question is based on a view of science which was developed in the Global North and does not consider other processes of knowledge generation.

Indigenous, local and pluriversal knowledge is meanwhile an essential aspect of the internationalisation of Social Work; affording deep insights into the interwoven nature everything living, without which it would not be possible to work together with people with a different cultural background. Indigenous resources, traditions, experiences, rituals, relationships, support networks, cultural memory and the underlying local ideas, principles, philosophies or values must be understood and articulated. Indigenous people have their own self-image and intensive links to their environment and the nature surrounding them, and they also have a well-formed cultural identity in a community with its own political and cultural traditions.

As an Australian colleague writes, Social Work with “*Aborigines*” is always work with “indigenous communities” with a completely different worldview (Briskman, 2014). However, this applies not only for Australia, but for everywhere that Social Work is in contact with indigenous communities.

In indigenous communities such as the Aboriginals in Australia or the First Nation People in Canada, people have been pushed by colonial intrusion and transformation of the world to the periphery of society (reservations), and in the course of this their rights and traditions have been diminished. In recent years, these indigenous peoples have been pursuing *identity politics* and have established their own self-image as *Indigenous movements* as descendants of the original inhabitants of a certain region and demand their rights as indigenous communities. They draw on a long tradition and “indigenous knowledge” based on broad and deep experience. They demand in particular an “ethical space of engagement” (Ermine, 2007) in order to dismantle hierarchies and epistemological injustice. Meanwhile there have also been various attempts to establish an independent *Indigenous Science*.

Internationalisation of Social Work must take all of this into consideration in their work and in interdisciplinary theoretical discussions. This requires not only cultural sensibility, but also an understanding of cultural tradition from within and a willingness to question western-based privileges and to “unlearn” these where it contributes to a deeper understanding (Spivak, 1999). Indigenous knowledge and indigenous movements are to be integrated in the theories and practices of Social Work, as is already happening in internationalisation of Social Work. Only in this way can appropriate ways be found to explain contexts and propose solutions for the range of problems faced globally and in particular also locally.

### ***Authentization and reconceptualisation***

*Indiginisation* and *localisation* have by extension been discussed as *authentization*: “the identification of genuine and authentic roots in the local system, which would be used for guiding its future development in a mature, relevant and original fash-

ion” (Ragab cited in. Walton & Abo El Nasr, 1988b, p. 149). Authentization is based more explicitly than indiginisation on local resources, indigenous knowledge and the specific needs in each case. Furthermore, the term *reconceptualisation* is used in critical circles: “Reconceptualisation is seen as focusing on reformulation of concepts so that they are in line with efforts to empower marginalised groups in society” (Osei-Hwedi, 1996, p. 216).

The underlying ideas have their roots in Freire’s *conscientisation* (critical consciousness) and Latin American liberation pedagogy (see above). Reconceptualisation emphasises in particular the political integration of practical measures in development contexts, with a focus on exclusion processes and their changes. This explicitly places the *Social Work of the South* in a political context, more closely tied into the development-related change of society (Osei-Hwedi, 1996, p. 216).

While *indiginisation* and *localisation* involve the adaption of western imports to local situations, *authentization* endeavours to establish local models of “Social Work of the South”. This can also be understood as the attempt to take into account the social, cultural, political and economic characteristics of a given country and a specific culture. Finally, *reconceptualisation* Social Work in the focus of policy making. The common goal is the development of appropriate knowledge which can be implemented in methods and procedures that are compatible with local conditions and requirements. In order to be able to advance these developments, social workers must have a profound knowledge of local conditions which allows them to sound out the cultural life in order to work with local communities. This approach should prevent the (re-)colonisation of worlds, promote cultural variety and offer pluriverse and fair opportunities for realisation within each given context.

## Philosophies of the South

The discourses of the South involve concepts, ideas and visions that are of key importance in the search for knowledge and ways of thought that lie outside colonial influences (Mbembe, 2016) or that can be rediscovered and updated. Here too the goal is independence, self-determination and overcoming global hegemony. The South will not provide romantic alternatives, but rather other possible views of the world. The people in the South do not want to return to some supposedly idyllic past, as is often alleged (or even hoped for) in the North – they want to develop their world. The philosophies are therefore impulses to further loosen the ‘chains of the North’.

Cyclical thought, which is often found or rediscovered in these philosophies, can be forward-looking. However, it does not possess a linearity of uninterrupted

progress, nor is it based on absolute rationality or ideas of generalisable knowledge, rather it includes dimensions such as feelings, relationships, and art, and is open to multiple interpretations alongside one another. The idea of development is self-contained, is without direction, and can be contradictory; it lives above all through the people, who are in harmony with themselves and with others and with the nature around them (Lutz, 2020b).

This dialectic can open up horizons and promote acceptance of variety. The ethnologist Descola has analysed the thinking of other cultures to which we feel superior (Descola, 2011). He sees in the naturalist thought of the North a belief that humans have been appointed as rulers and owners of nature. This has separated them from nature and thus from themselves and has also contributed to the climate crisis. A dichotomy, a dualism of nature and culture has resulted which is a pure construction, a rigid narrative that limits life. Originally, nature and culture were not separated but formed together some third entity, that in almost all cultures was seen as unified and interdependent. This must be re-established by continuity instead of rupture, by contact instead of separation, by community instead of individualisation, by cycles instead of acceleration.

The conclusion is that the separations of internal and external, self and society, nature, and culture, which are typical for the thought of the Global North, are hindrances and must be redressed (Lutz et al., 2017). This involves overcoming dualism in thought with the goal of providing a new basis for the interdependence of all living things. Links to locations, ancestors, suffering, friends, events, memories, objects, animals, forest, or all other things that are not “I” are more constitutive than we are willing to accept within established scientific thought. As a consequence, other forms of community, co-existence and cohesion must be formed.

These considerations are apparent in the *buen vivir* Andean cultures (Cubillo-Guevara et al., 2018). *Buen vivir* sees itself as a world view that is community-centric and not capitalist, and it propagates a life that is in harmony with itself and with nature. This relates to an *Andean and indigenous logic* which attaches special importance to relationships, far from the modern logic of the North. Individuals cannot be viewed independently from the community and/or nature. Relationships are always complementary and reciprocal. Identity can therefore be “one” but also something else. Human activity is to be assessed in terms of whether it contributes to the preservation and reproduction of life. The focus is also on concepts that are discussed in the North such as appreciation of variety, tolerance of contradictions, the equality of humans and nature, and a great relevance of non-material values.

This philosophy of *buen vivir* also represents the struggle of indigenous movements for the recognition of tradition and knowledge (Kalny, 2017). The wish is to bid farewell to failed attempts to pursue production-oriented progress and development as a mechanistic one-way street of growth. This still involves organising

resistance against colonialism and its consequences, in particular also against the “externalisation” of the consequences of growth to the peripheries of the planet (Lessenich, 2016). Finally, the aim of *buen vivir* is to establish “horizontal” societies based on direct democracy, direct action, self-administration and broad and participatory debates.

These ideas fed into Latin American liberation pedagogy, which has been influencing the discourse in the North for many decades (Lutz, 2020a).

In southern Africa, *Ubuntu*, a traditional life philosophy, established itself once again after the end colonialism, showing further aspects of another possible world (Mathews, 2018). In an African context, reference is also made to “home grown” philosophies. These “words” stand for “humanity”, “neighbourly love”, and “community spirit”, as well as “experiences” and the “consciousness” of a subject who is part of the whole. An attitude and a practical approach to relationships is formulated that is based on mutual respect, recognition, respect for human dignity and establishing a harmonious and peaceful society. This comes close to a theory of recognition (Honneth, 1992, 2013, 2018), which in the North forms a foundation for work with people (Lutz, 2011). Links are also established to belief and religiosity which brings together everything human. This could call into question some arguments advanced in the current debate on religiosity and secularity in the North (Kiesel & Lutz, 2016).

*Ubuntu* has both political and religious-spiritual aspects that emphasise the responsibility and the integration of people in the community. In common with the Andean philosophy of *buen vivir*, it highlights ideas and forms of community that are also newly arising in the North regarding questions of cohesion in the society of singularities.

In their writings, Sarr (2019) and Mbembe (2016) call for an *Afrotopia* or a way *Out of the dark night*, not only for Africa. Both criticise the “imperial way of life”, because hegemonial western knowledge has established itself as “general knowledge”, displacing African (indigenous) traditions and knowledge, or devaluing these by theories of race and ethnicity. The criticism has led to a search for ways to re-evaluate repressed knowledge and traditions and to develop a new self-understanding that shows the world what it has lost by imposing purely instrumental reason, and what it could gain by reconsidering this. This brings us close to “border thinking” approaches that consider how various forms of knowledge can exist next to one another but also in dialogue with one another (Lutz et al., 2017). This also reflects the controversy between “indigenous, local, and pluriverse knowledge” on the one hand and “scientific knowledge” on the other. This can only be resolved if both interpretations of the world can stand side-by-side as equals.

Mbembe not only calls for Africa to become aware of heteronomy. He is searching for a new form of democracy, which could become very important in times



of climate change. This should not be anthropocentric, but should integrate the entire planet, the people, all fauna and flora, the rivers, the air, and everything which supports life on our planet. Sarr seeks counterweights to colonial and hegemonial alienation in the rediscovery of the cultural wealth and variety of community-oriented thought in African cultures, which still exist despite the desecrations of colonialism. The revival of experience-based knowledge can be important in the current crises, as is being shown in agricultural science.

Approaches in the North can be regarded very differently in the light of these philosophies. There may be alternatives to the dominant hegemonial thought in the North, but these have a shadow existence. They can be drawn on to critically review personal attitudes in the North, and for reflecting on ways the North can learn from the South.

## Practices and methods

In the regions of the Global South it is (still) possible to identify a very wide variety of different cultures. For the internationalisation of Social Work it is essential to have a thorough understanding of people and their world views. Economic, social, religious, cultural, traditional, psychological, and political factors must be taken into consideration (Osei-Hwedie, 1996, p. 217). Knowledge of natural networks is also important, including the family and kinships, ethnic groups, the education system, and the community. There may also be on-going or long-standing conflicts, and events and secrets from the past which still influence relationships today.

This interwoven “natural network” can be understood as a cultural basis, and as a starting point it gives rise to important questions. Internationalisation of Social Work has to recognise the uniqueness of culture, the central role of culture in service provision and the right to self-determination” (Osei-Hwedie, 1996, p. 220). The analysis of culture is always the first step towards understanding people and their problems. In particular, elements of culture, tradition, religion and rituals can be helpful for promoting development processes. If the integral structures, relationships, values and philosophies of a culture are not taken into consideration it can reduce the acceptance of proposed changes. Social workers must understand other cultures as complex networks, involving relationships, traditions, and indigenous knowledge, and at the same time should also critically examine their own culture. In this respect they are also ethnologists, using dialogues to contribute to making processes possible and with this attempting to maintain the balance between liberty and equality in an “ethical space of engagement”.

### *Dialogue as praxis*

A form of dialogue is required as the praxis of a science that draws on Paulo Freire and others (see above). The pedagogic interactions must be characterised by a *Student – Teacher – Teacher – Student relationship*, a dialogue in which all the participants are involved. People are the experts (protagonists) about their own life. The aim of the dialogue therefore cannot be that social workers explain their own world-view and try to persuade others to accept this. Rather, an approach oriented on the lived worlds reflects the life situations in people's interpretations. The key methodological principles can be applied in various ways:

- In the *thematic universe*, day-to-day experiences can be identified that are *generative topics*, problems that people seek to comprehend and that lead them to search for answers. Questions can then be addressed about the importance of these topics for people's own lives;
- In these topics, *key situations* are identified, with concepts and images in which the significance of situations is coded. The integrated meanings and backgrounds are uncovered, leading to an understanding and shared comprehension. As underlying structures become apparent, it is possible to consider their effects, opening up new topics and situations;
- In contrast to the colonial *banking concept* in education, a *problem-solving method* enables and empowers people to become independent individuals by asking questions and gaining knowledge to cope with and shape their own lives.

### *Enablement and empowerment*

Internationalisation of Social Work as an idea and practical approach stands in a structural context of enablement and empowerment as an actor of *social change* and *social development*. Integral to this is the unfolding of freedom and degrees of freedom, which is discussed as *human development*. Freedom is a structural property and offers scope for processes of appropriation and structuring through which a *good life* can become possible. This is based on a concept of development extending beyond colonial alienation.

In stark contrast to hegemonial paradigms in the development cooperation discourse, Amartya Sen, among others, argues that development “consists of the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency” (Sen, 1999, p. xii). A human life is seen as involving a sequence of actions and living conditions in which something can be achieved, and these form a collection of functions. “Capabilities” are the alternative combinations of functions from which an individual can choose when deciding what kind of life they wish to lead.

These are the preconditions for the free expansion of human capabilities. This also implies expanding not only human competences such as self-respect and capacity to act, but also the feeling of belonging to a community, which promotes identity and the respect of others. The increased options that arise and the greater opportunities for realisation must be available for all and not only for an elite. This “capability approach”, which has led among other things to a re-orientation of entire United Nations’ programmes of “human development” and a more critical view of linear economic growth models, has also influenced Social Work (Birgmeier, 2017).

Freeing itself from the influence of the Global North and colonialism, “Social Work of the South” sees itself as an actor of “social development” (Midgley, 2009; Patel, 2009). It will and must address the various problems in the Global South using its own approaches in order to find its own, self-supporting solutions. In addition to community work, this involves in particular sustainable livelihoods projects which guarantee nutritional sovereignty and make a materially self-determined life possible and thus above all establish and secure access to local markets (Yunus, 1998, but also the criticism in Klas, 2011).

International Social Work perspectives challenge policy-makers to deliver the necessary framework conditions, orient itself primarily on prevention and only secondarily on intervention, endeavours to empower the subjects in relationships, focusses on communities, going beyond individual case help, and aims in particular to promote scope for capabilities and opportunities for realisation at the local level. Emphasis is placed on development-related strategies. Against this background, concepts, and practical work in the internationalisation of Social Work can be understood as processes of implementing “human development”; people are the agents of development.

### ***Translation and an ethnological view***

In internationalisation of Social Work, and not only there, understanding forms the basis for dialogue, recognition, and empowerment. Following Paulo Freire, the process of understanding and activating is defined as a problem-formulating method (Lutz, 2011). Social workers are dialogue partners who work together with people to ‘uncover’ (formulate) their everyday entanglements and find ways out of oppressive situations. Translation and an ethnological view are essential.

“Translation” not only involves linguistic skills (Buden et. al., 2009). “Border thinking” is required, an understanding of the other, in which widely varying cultural and biographical backgrounds are decoded, so that they can be taken into consideration in daily cooperation (Lutz et al., 2017). This requires both intercultural competences and stances as well as a process of understanding, which means an *ethnological perspective*.

This ethnological perspective offers an understanding of and participatory access to the contexts, values, backgrounds, secrets and myths of initially unfamiliar life-styles. Understanding in this case does not involve immediate normative comparisons, which is what happens with “othering”. Possibly unconsidered backgrounds are to be included in the process of understanding. The ethnological perspective highlights the hegemonial and colonial contexts influencing encounters.

## Radical Social Work

Calls have been growing louder, particularly in the Global South, for a further radicalisation of Social Work and its role in society. In 1993, Ankrah wrote: “Radical developmental social work of an interdisciplinary nature, guided by informed, forward-thinking professionals and grounded in African realities, may be the only answer if the profession is to survive in the next century” (Ankrah, 1987 cited in Mupedziswa, 1993, p. 160).

This demand is based on the analysis that the colonial and purely technical and instrumental Social Work of the North is irrelevant, inappropriate and ineffective for the South. It is necessary to abandon the liberal character of a value-free science and adopt more radical and liberating positions so that Social Work can break free from institutions and processes which have led to the social problems it is supposed to tackle. Social Work must become involved as a political actor.

*Radical Social Work* involves refocussing Social Work well beyond each individual, reflecting social positions and uncovering how disruptions, exploitation, oppression, land-grabbing, and social structures minimise people’s opportunities and capabilities (cf. Lavalette, 2011). It challenges the political sphere, creating a political stage for subaltern groups and adopting a different view of politics and institutional social policies oriented towards the social state. Politics is understood as a chain of subjectivisations, calling into question the cultural and political position of the marginalised (and their supposed representatives). The struggle between poor and rich, between the powerful and the subaltern, is therefore not a problem to be solved by civil society institutions, but is politics itself (Ranci re, 2006).

As the marginalised and the voiceless become more aware of their position and stand up for their rights, social structures are revised. Among other things, this means withdrawing from the superficial consensus and the social contract of institutionalised politics and civil society representation, which is often reduced to influential NGOs and welfare associations (Kleibl & Munck, 2014). Garrett (2018) argues that Ranci re’s work may aid critical reflection by social workers and a re-ordering of the political. This is the most outspoken and radical expression of So-

cial Work in the South which (as in fact also in the North) draws on resistance, movement, liberation, and utopia.

In recent decades, the “Social Work of the North” has undergone a massive transformation. Its formerly critical-emancipatory perspective has receded into the background; the focus has moved increasingly to work with individuals, although individuals, families and social groups have increasingly been made dependent on social structures and processes (Lutz, 2022; Scherr, 2019).

The remit of Social Work should not be to administer phenomena such as poverty on behalf of the state in a cost-effective manner or to ameliorate the negative impacts on those who are affected (Butterwegge, 2015), but rather to reveal the social and political causes and to contribute to changes.

It has been argued that Social Work should critically reconsider its role as a kind of repair shop for the undesired consequences of cultural, economic and social transformation (Scherr, 2015). A paradigm shift is required to a (re-)politicisation of Social Work (cf. Lutz, 2020c; Preis, 2015; Scherr, 2019; Thole & Wagner, 2019). The main objective for the profession should be to become involved in political concerns and to call into question the supposed interpretative authority of politics, the media, and bureaucracy.

In Germany, the *Arbeitskreis Kritische Sozialarbeit* (AKS)<sup>4</sup> offers a platform for networking, (self)critical exchange, and the adoption of alternative perspectives. Perhaps the Social Work of the North can learn a new radicality from the Social Work of the South, which is oriented on societal movements. The ethical substance of a society must be measured in terms of the extent to which its members enjoy substantial freedoms.

## Green Social Work

“The natural world will not care if social workers spend their time solely focused on insuring a degree of social justice for the human species. The earth system will collapse whether social workers are successful at those efforts or not” (Besthorn, 2012, p. 248). *Green Social Work* takes a critical view of social relations and explicitly places the demand for environmental justice within the concept of social justice, which has always been an integral part of Social Work (Dominelli, 2018). The consequences of environmental disruption are being felt all over the world,

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<sup>4</sup> AKS was founded in 2005 and is organised in more than 20 regional groups. It offers scope for a (self)-critical perspective of societal developments, the profession and practice of social work in contrast to mainstream social work and social policies and the hegemonial neoliberal discourse. See [www.kritischesozialearbeit.de](http://www.kritischesozialearbeit.de)

creating addressees for Social Work as people are torn out of their lifeworld or find that they are increasingly facing existential threats.

No clear distinction can be made between anthropogenic and natural environmental catastrophes and crises. However, there is now a scientific consensus about anthropogenic global warming and the dire consequences of climate change for the entire planet. There are signs of growing awareness about the problems – not least due to movements such as ‘Fridays for Future’. However, the debate about climate justice should not be related exclusively to the coming generations and individual consumption. Rather an holistic perspective should be adopted – linking climate justice with social or global justice.

The Global North has been responsible for some two-thirds of historical greenhouse gas emissions, and only in this way was it possible to set up factories and infrastructure and to accumulate capital and wealth (Reif & Dahm, 2017, p. 18).

The gap between rich and poor is also clearly demonstrated in the CO<sub>2</sub>-footprints. The poorest 50% of the global population cause only 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions, but the richest 10% are responsible for nearly half of all CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (Oxfam, 2015, p. 3). However, the impacts and consequences of global warming affect above all the countries of the Global South. For Africa, global warming of 1.5°C will already have considerable impact on agriculture and projected food availability, and increased water stress and greater risks of disease transmission are also predicted. In Asia, rapidly progressing global warming will threaten people’s existences, with rising sea levels, increased heat-related morbidity and mortality, and drought-related shortages of water and food (IPCC, 2019).

Climate change also impacts on the Global North, but to a much lesser extent. In addition, the economic stability of the countries of the Global North and their advanced technologies mean that they are better able to cope with the acute and chronic consequences of climate changes. (IPCC, 2019). This illustrates the close links between industrialisation, colonialization, power, social inequalities, neoliberal policies and climate change.

Johan Röckstrom et al. (2009) have identified nine planetary boundaries that define the stability of the ecosystem. Going beyond these could have catastrophic consequences for the entire planet. Kate Raworth has developed a model that also integrates minimum social, political and cultural boundaries. Between the planetary boundaries and the social boundaries is the safe and just space for humanity in which inclusive and sustainable economic development takes place (Raworth, 2012, p. 4). An economic approach is needed which adopts both planetary boundaries and the minimum standards as starting points for assessing economic activities. The aim should no longer be economic growth *per se* but rather bringing humanity into the “safe and just space”. In order to achieve this, political decision-

makers must assume accountability for the effects of economic activities (Raworth, 2012, p. 8).

Social Work should adopt a clearer stance regarding climate policies. It should work towards the minimum requirements in the sense of human rights, while at the same time not losing sight of the planetary boundaries. To achieve this, a trans-disciplinary perspective and the inclusion of indigenous and local knowledge could be advantageous or necessary for sustainable development (see 3. Indiginisation, authentization, reconceptualisation; Masoga & Shokane, 2019).

## Post-colonial feminist Social Work

The language of decolonisation is meanwhile used by many indigenous, African diaspora groups and social activists as well as critical social researchers. The confrontation with the colonial past is driven by a fundamental criticism of the persistent discrimination and racism which arose out of colonialism. Many of these groups demand comprehensive changes to the post-colonial national, transnational and international relationships of countries and societies, a transformation of the global capitalist economic order and a revaluation of cultural and collective rights and Eurocentric forms of feminism. Postcolonial feminist Social Work offers a response to these discourses and practices; it is a movement within Social Work which adopts a critical view of the training of social workers, the research and practical work, with the goal of decolonising Social Work at the various levels. This social-work movement draws on concepts such as critical whiteness, anti-racist Social Work, indigenous approaches, “learning to unlearn” Euro-American epistemology, and also intersectional perspectives (Kleibl, 2020). Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), one of the most influential postcolonial feminist theoreticians, studies the characteristics of feminism and the parallel colonial global structures. According to her, the representation of the *Third-World Woman* is a construction of western feminism and must therefore be situated and deconstructed geopolitically.

Post-colonial feminist Social Work focuses on gender and brings this into combination with other social categories such as ethnicity and skin colour which are relevant for post-colonial theories and reflections on post-colonial inequality. Postcolonial feminist Social Work, like intersectionality, originated in the Black women’s movement and is concerned with overcoming hegemonial power relationships, with the focus of interest lying at the intersection of cultural and gender differences (do Mar Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2009). In addition to the lack of references to gender in the dominant post-colonial theory, western hegemonial feminism is often criticised for propagating in women’s empowerment projects

a supposedly modern, independent image of women in countries of the Global South, completely ignoring the cultural variety of pre-colonial gender roles and continued existence of flexible gender constructions. Western hypotheses about the oppressed women in countries of the Global South are often simply repeated instead of drawing on local cultural resources and intra-gender hierarchies within kinship structures when arguing for more just power relationships between genders (Jaji & Kleibl, 2020).

Western empowerment concepts often fail to acknowledge the diversity of sociocultural positioning of women in countries of the Global South. From a postcolonial-feminist perspective it is often criticised that transformation of traditional gender-roles and relationships as a result of colonisation and Christianisation has led to a rigid re-positioning of women and in part to their unshakeable subordination to men. Western education introduced in the colonial era marginalised belief in supernatural powers and spiritual media that are used for making contact with the dead. It is often ignored that these spiritual links give women special power and authority. At the same time, many western education systems have continued to propagate domesticated women's images, in which women are solely responsible for the family and the care of family members.

The debate on these and other topics also raises new questions for a Social Work of the South formed by postcolonial feminism. How can women be strengthened in settings with subaltern and disempowered men? Which cultural networks should be taken into consideration in each case when promoting women and men in countries of the Global South? When considering empowerment, postcolonial feminists demand, traditional structures in countries of the South should be analysed and used as a basis (Jaji & Kleibl, 2020). Without this "analytical category", empowerment within Social Work runs the risk of becoming part of the postcolonial mechanism of oppression by failing to acknowledge the specifically different socio-cultural positioning of women in countries of the Global South. Rasool (2020) therefore calls on social workers in an African context to take culture as a reference point and basis for Social Work activities. The differences between the various African feminist women's groups must be taken into consideration. This can lead to political demands for the recognition of diversity within the international women's movement, which is the undisputed foundation of "modern" Social Work.

## Outlook: acting locally, thinking globally

Global networking and exchange have meanwhile given rise to *internationally discussed Social Work* (Kleibl et al., 2020; Lutz & Stauss, 2016; Wagner et al., 2018) which finds itself between various traditions and is subject to continuous transformation



processes. The perspective for this internationalisation, through the continuous discussion of commonalities and ambivalences, lies in the crystallisation of an *International Social Work*. Difference is the central characteristic around which a common discourse and claims are grouped, and which constantly gives rise to new questions.

Social Work must arise out of the differences that have developed in the North and the South, and this requires exchange. Both differences and shared ideas can be integrated, but they will continually be subject to scrutiny and open critical reflection. Contradictions lead to a continuous process of reformation. Local alternatives may in some cases be incompatible, but a field of debate can be established in which commonalities and ambivalences can be repeatedly recombined. Even though difference is the key characteristic, a core can be recognised around which all the differences cluster and which lead to normative utopias of a good life and which constantly question, critically review and readapt practical approaches.

In this interwoven Social Work (Lutz & Strauss, 2016; Lutz & Kleibl, 2020), ambivalences and contextuality are of fundamental importance, rather than universality and contextual independence. Experience and knowledge of the North and the South are globally available and can be adapted to local conditions and local (indigenous) knowledge. This results in a completely new perspective, and the ambivalences can lead to reflections on what the North can learn from the experiences of the South, and vice-versa. Gradual liberation from the constraints of imperial colonialization processes (both in the South and the North), and meanwhile also global exchanges, mean that Social Work can be seen to be ‘interwoven’. It must be globally linked but must necessarily act locally.

The consideration of the Internationalisation of Social Work shows that the variety of life necessarily calls for a range of theories and methods. But the narrowness and the contextuality of thought (and of Social Work) in the Global North also becomes apparent. A global exchange and contacts with locally formed traditions and approaches can lead to the development of interwoven, mutually supporting Social Work which is constantly responding to new challenges. The currently dominant “instrumental thought” in the North can be relativised and called into question; Social Work can open itself up more for a critical-reflexive theory of the society, and take as topics itself, its location, its geopolitical context, and its tasks.

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