

The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development. On the way to real Utopia?

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Abstract

The recently passed ILO Recommendation concerning national floors on social protection can be seen as a “real Utopia” substantiating Articles 22 and 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Those articles are stating the right to social security and to the standard of living adequate for health and well-being. The paper discusses the possible contributions of international social work and especially of „The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development” to promote and support those rights. The European financial crisis endangers the attainments of the welfare state. The promise of social security for all is becoming fragile. Under the title „Confronting Social Transition, Realising Utopia, Safeguarding the Social” the international conference in Brixen in June 2012 seeks for guiding ideas and real Utopias for social professions in this time of transition, crisis and upheaval.

On the background of my new position as representative of the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) at the United Nations in Geneva I will present you a „real Utopia” aiming at social security for all. After this first part of my contribution I will discuss the role international social work can play for the realisation of this Utopia. Highly relevant for this discussion is „The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development”, which the three global Organisations¹ in the field of Social Welfare and Social Work have given themselves in 2012 to strengthen their role and influence on the international level.

1 ICSW: International Council of Social Welfare; IASS: International Association of Schools of Social Work; IFSW: International Federation of Social Work

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1. Real Utopia

The invitation for this conference defines real Utopia as the planned attempt to “anticipate desired future social developments”. Silvia Staub-Bernasconi (1994), receiver of the Mary Kendall award for outstanding achievements in the field of social work and Human Rights two years ago in Hong Kong, once said that Human Rights are real Utopia (Realutopien) as they conceive a desirable social life of peace, justice and well-being respecting human dignity. Furthermore the conditions and means for their realisation can clearly be specified. In this sense Article 22 and 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 postulating the right to social security and the right to an adequate standard of living are a real Utopia of topmost importance to social work.

Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 reads:

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international cooperation and in accordance with the organizations and resources of each state, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

And Article 25 says:

1. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

This does not describe a reality. The World Social Security Report 2010/11 estimates “that only about 20 per cent of the world’s working-age population (and their families) have effective access to comprehensive social protection”

(ILO, 2010, p. 1). Nearly one third has no access to any health facilities or services at all and it is estimated that 4 of 5 persons worldwide have no adequate social protection across the life cycle and in situation of vulnerability (ILO, 2010). According to statistics of the World Bank in 2005 48 % (3.08 billions) of the world's population live under the international poverty line of 2.5 \$ a day and 1.38 billion live in extreme poverty (Pogge, 2008).

Social security has been on the agenda of the United Nations and its agencies since 1948 and several steps have been taken to realise the Utopia of social security. I will not go in details of this long development but only mention some highlights and achievements on this way.

- 1952 The International Labour Organisation ILO adopted the *Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention* (No. 102) (in force since 1955)². The convention establishes worldwide-agreed minimum standards for social security.
- 1966 The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states in § 9: *"The States Parties recognize the right of everyone to social security, including social insurance."*
- 2008 With the *"Declaration on Social Justice for a fair Globalization"*³ ILO restates its mandate and objectives in the contemporary context of globalization, trade liberalization and financial crisis. In particular ILO strengthens its capacity for concrete actions and increases its influence on non-state actors (Maupain, 2009), Social protection is one of the four strategic objectives together with employment, social dialogue and rights at work.
- 2009 The UN Chief Executive Board for Coordination adopted the *Social Protection Floor Initiative* co-led by ILO and WHO. It is a joint initia-

2 http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312247

3 http://www.ilo.org/global/meetings-and-events/campaigns/voices-on-social-justice/WCMS_099766/lang-en/index.htm

tive of many UN Agencies and international financial institutions. The aim is to cope with the effects of the economic crisis. The SPF Initiative developed the concept, tested its practicability and demonstrated its feasibility and effectiveness in several states⁴.

2012 The 101st ILO International Labour Conference in Geneva in June 2012 passed a *Recommendation concerning national Floors on Social Protection*⁵. This is an important step to implement the initiative on a global level and to enhance the binding character of the Social Protection Floor for the states accepting the obligation and ratifying the recommendation.

2012 *Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights* were adopted by the Human Right Council in September 2012 as “a useful tool for States in the formulation and implementation of poverty reduction and eradication policies.”⁶ These Guiding Principles together with the Publication “The Human Rights Approach to Social Protection” of Magdalena Sepulveda, Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and Human Rights at the Human Right Council, further concretise the implementation of social protection systems (Sepulveda & Nyst, 2012).

2. Social Protection Floor

The Social Protection Floor is a political framework to introduce basic social security for all on the national level. In the last years social protection became predominant in the discourse of poverty reduction after the deadline for the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) after 2015. The concept of SPF is an extension and advancement of the MDG as it concretizes the instruments to

4 <http://www.social-protection.org/gimi/gess/ShowTheme.do?tid=1321>

5 http://www.ilo.org/ilc/ILCSessions/101stSession/reports/provisional-records/WCMS_183326/lang-en/index.htm

6 http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-39_en.pdf

achieve poverty reduction. The adoption of the MDG had to overcome a strong opposition fighting implementation of social political instruments. So the MDG concentrated mainly on the reduction of numbers and indicators of poverty but neglected the political instruments that have proved in many countries to be most effective: the guarantee of basic needs by the state, compulsory and additional voluntary but state controlled insurances against life risks.

The aim of the Social Protection Floor is the extension of social protection for all. It is part of national social security systems with three successive levels of growing protection built on top of one another:

1. The Social Protection Floor is the first basic level giving four essential guarantees:
 - Access to health care for all
 - Income security for children
 - Assistance for unemployed and poor
 - Income security for elderly and disabled
2. The second step of the social security staircase is based on contributory social security of guaranteed levels.
3. The third level relies on voluntary insurances under government regulation.



Fig. 1 : The Social Protection Floor as part of the social security staircase. Global Extension of social security (Gess). <http://www.social-protection.org/gimi/gess/ShowTheme.do?tid=2505>

SPF introduced on the national level and is owned by the state and the state has the ultimate responsibility. For a comprehensive protection of all it is important to adopt the whole package, although it may be introduced gradually. In poor countries not all guarantees can be introduced at once.

The SPF concept contains two main elements:

- Services: essential services such as water and sanitation, health and education
- Transfers: basic set of essential transfers in cash or in kind to provide minimum income security and access to essential services including health care.

The rationale of the Social Protection Floor is manifold: it is an investment not only in social justice but also in economic development. The reduction of poverty and inequality and the contribution to economic growth enhances both, social and economic stability. *Social security is a human right as well as a social and economic necessity.*

On request the global SPF Initiative supports national SPF. The SPF process is consultative, inclusive, and participatory involving all stakeholders, governments, social partners, parliamentarians and civil society through a social dialogue. It has been tested in some countries e.g.:

- Cape verde: introduced social welfare benefits and pensions for the poorest, social insurances, employment intensive public works to guarantee income for working poor. The Human Development Index showed considerable improvements.
- Zambia: for the reduction of extreme poverty cash transfer schemes were implemented for older persons caring for orphaned children.
- India: introduced the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. A rural household is entitled to demand up to 100 days of employment per year.

- Brazil: bolsa familiar, one of the largest assistance programme giving families in extreme poverty a minimum level of income on condition that children go to school. 2008 47 million people received this assistance. The costs were 0.4 % of Gross domestic product, 1.8 of federal government budget.
- Thailand: introduced a full health care covering 98 % of the population

Evaluation of first experiences showed that the concept of the Social Protection Floor proved to be *practicable, efficient and affordable*. This allows us to speak of a real Utopia. SPF was mainly developed and tested in threshold and poor countries in the South and it probably does not directly apply to the situation in Europe where systems of social security have been introduced decades ago in many countries. But there is a clear parallel with the history of European social policy. The provision of general schooling, health services, sanitation, insurances, and last but not least social services and social work was crucial for triggering development and overcoming great poverty. In the actual crisis and austerity policy in Europe the experience of the SPF may be helpful to remind us, that *social and economic development are going together. The resolution of the financial and economic crisis at the expense of social security is not sustainable and violates fundamental Human Rights and destroys the basis of well-being and development. Wilkinson and Picket (2008) have demonstrated impressively that "equality is better for everyone". There is rich empirical evidence that health and social problems are worse in more unequal countries.*⁷

3. The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development

Without question the activities of the United Nations and its agencies concerning poverty reduction, human rights and social protection are of high

⁷ see also Equality Trust <http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/about>

relevance for social work. The international organisations of social work and social welfare are accredited to the United Nations. Representatives of IFSW in New York and in Geneva participated and contributed to those year long processes of opinion making, consultation, debates and negotiations in many panels, meetings and committees. A coalition of NGOs, among which ICSW and IFSW supported the recommendation for SPF, was lobbying during the debates and is promoting the ratification and implementation of Social Protection Floors.

The adoption of the "Recommendation concerning national Floors on Social Protection" or of the "Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights" are big achievements and important milestones for the commitment of IFSW representative at the United Nation. But it is by no means an endpoint; it is rather a starting point for the international social work organisations. Now the recommendations have to be ratified, guiding principles have to be put into action, social protection floors have to be implemented. "Real Utopia" has to be transformed into reality. And this can not be done in and by the United Nations and its agencies alone. The commitment of States, civil society and international organisations around the world are called to overcome poverty, to achieve social security and to respect Human Rights.

Helen Clark, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, addressed social workers at World Social Work Day at the UN in New York: "Social workers must speak up; get involved with UN agendas and challenge inequality and injustice. There are so many complementarities and synergies between the UN agenda and the work of social workers; we must find better ways to work together."

"The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development" is a response to such a call for cooperation. It is a strong Commitment to Action that international organisations of social work and social welfare gave themselves. I will describe it in the following chapter.

The vision for the Agenda process starting in 2004 or 2005 was:

- To claim/reclaim the priority of social action
- To create a collective voice of those in social work and social development and in social work education
- To develop a process for setting a common agenda
- To address the major challenges of our societies
- To identify major and relevant social issues that connect within and across our profession
- To provide a basis for action

The three international organisations of social work and social welfare participated in this process. The three organisations, whose common origins go back to 1928, are representing the broad field of social work professions and practice, social work education and social development work:

- International Federation of Social Workers (www.ifsw.org)
IFSW represents 750'000 social workers in more than 90 countries.
- International Association of Schools of Social Work (www.iassw.org)
Thousands of schools with some 500'000 students are members of IASSW.
- International Council on Social Welfare (www.icsw.org)
ICSW represents tens of thousands of international, national and community organisations that work directly with people in poverty, hardship or distress.

The three organisations established a common platform to steer the Global Agenda process. At the joint conference in Hong Kong, June 2010, a first draft was discussed and it was decided to launch a movement that addresses the major challenges of our societies. Relevant social issues were identified. A world wide process of consultations and discussions was initiated among the members of the organisations.

After two years and many drafts “The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development – A Commitment to Action” was officially presented and delivered to the United Nations in New York, Geneva, Nairobi, Santiago and Bangkok and to the African Union, the Council of Europe etc. on occasion of the celebration of World Social Work Day 2012.

The Global Agenda formulates strong commitments for social workers, educators and social development practitioners:

- “We commit ourselves to supporting, influencing and enabling structures and systems that positively address the root causes of oppression and inequality.
- We commit ourselves wholeheartedly and urgently to work together with people who use services and with others who share our objectives and aspirations to create a more socially-just and faire world that we will be proud to leave to future generations.”

During the period of 2012–2016 the efforts will be focused in four areas:

- Promoting social and economic equalities
- Promoting the dignity and worth of people
- Working toward environmental sustainability
- Strengthening recognition of the importance of human relationships

In each of these areas specific Commitments to Action have been specified aiming at three different target groups:

- The United Nations and international organisations
- Communities and other partners
- Our own organisation

To illustrate I will cite in extenso the commitments concerning the first objective, the promotion of social and economic equalities, which will be the prioritized theme for 2013–2014:

Our role in promoting social and economic equalities

The United Nations and other international agencies

We commit to support, influence and promote global initiatives aimed at achieving social and economic equality. We will accomplish this by using and strengthening our established relationships with the UN system and other international agencies. We will support the Millennium Development Goals. Our major focus is to prepare for the post-2015 development agenda, which includes, for example, the social protection floor initiative; decent work and international labour standards; the WHO initiative on the social determinants of health; and education for all.

We will strive with others for a people focused global economy that is regulated to protect and promote social justice, human rights and sustainable development.

Communities and other partners

We will support and work in collaboration with others for the development of strong local communities that promote the sustainable social wellbeing of all their members. Our major focus is to strengthen the capacity of communities to interact with their government to extend social and economic development.

Our own organisations

We will work within our own organisations to promote education and practice standards in social work and social development that enable workers to facilitate sustainable social development outcomes. (Global Agenda, 2012)

Assane Diop, Managing director of ILO Social Protection Department, received the Global Agenda on behalf of UN and ILO at World Social Work Day 2012 at the UN in Geneva. He warmly welcomed the Global Agenda being “fully compatible with the mandate of the ILO and the UN at large” and being “also a formidable support for the transmission of that mandate into reality.” In particular he called for help to implement the Social Protection Floor Initiative.

Coordinated action plans by the three global bodies closely linked to UN agenda 2012–2016 will structure the implementation process of the Global Agenda. One of the themes identified in the Global agenda will be prioritized

each year as joint focus for the Agenda partners and will be announced at World Social Work Day.

Periodical monitoring, reviewing and reports will make the process transparent and open for initiatives and participation of members and partners and give account to members and partner organisations. Activities and achievements relating to the previous year's theme will be presented and celebrated at World Social Work Day.

The prioritized focus for 2013–2014 will be: *Promoting Social and Economic Equality*.

IFSW will prepare a policy statement and launch a campaign among members to encourage activities and publications on this theme on the regional, national and local level⁸. IFSW will promote development, dissemination and exchange of knowledge concerning the impact of inequality. IFSW aims at scientific publication in *International Social Work* and seeks for partners for research on the focus theme and evaluation of the Agenda process. UN representatives will focus their activities and statements around this theme.

Global Agenda is no Utopia, but it is an instrument designed to support and to promote the realisation of the Utopia conceived in the Human Rights declaration and in the promise of a life without poverty. The Global Agenda makes the commitment of social work visible; Global Agenda focuses the activities between and within the three international organisations; it encourages, inspires and supports commitments and activities of members and member organisations respecting regional, national and cultural values, differences and priorities.

To sum it up: the reason for this paper is to present you a “real utopia” in poverty reduction and to highlight the important role social work, that means we all, may play to develop, to promote and to implement this “real utopia”. I am convinced that realizing Social Protection Floor would make a difference, alleviate the fate of many poor in the world and “facilitate a good and just life in a well ordered society” (Aristoteles⁹).

8 In her speech at World Social Work Day 2012 at the United Nations in Geneva Silvia Staub-Bernasconi identified several opportunities for social workers to promote Human Rights in their professional activities.

9 in the Flyer inviting to the Conference “Confronting Social Transition, Realizing Utopia, Safeguarding the Social” Brixen 2012

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