

Preface

The academic year 2019/2020 marked 20 years since the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano has offered a degree programme in Social Work. We have taken this anniversary as an opportunity to come together with colleagues from academia and practice in a conference and to discuss challenges and outlooks for social work practice, education, and research in a comparative and European perspective.

What we could not expect back then was how much the COVID-19 pandemic would have changed the everyday life of people all over the world, how differently it would have affected people, how it would have increased social inequalities and how suddenly social solidarity would have been so prominently back on the political agenda. Addressing the challenges of protecting and not leaving behind the most vulnerable and the most in need, maintaining social cohesion in the face of adversities and finding a consensus on evidence-informed and socially acceptable policies and practices in times of uncertainty needs more than the decreeing of border closures, social distancing and downlocking social life. On the contrary, it is *the social* with its institutions and practices that provides not just benefits or services for those in need, but which constitutes the very base for the organisation of social solidarity and for ensuring that societies are not falling apart.

In our call for contributions to the conference we had underlined that the essential characteristic and central challenge of social work lies in the embeddedness in and the necessary engagement with the once so called “social question”, its analysis, interpretation and handling through the development of integrated responses in different welfare contexts. In this sense, social work has a socially important function of mediation by which it is challenged again and again, both as profession and discipline. This understanding of social work emphasises its dynamic character and its ongoing development as

an open project dealing with processes of social change to which social work is ideally not only subject, but which it also helps to shape. Based on its scientific and ethical foundations it understands itself as a reflexive, proactive, and accountable agent in the shaping of the social.

Offering a degree programme in Social Work in a multilingual border region requires a strong commitment to develop both a common understanding of social work beyond language, culture, and national borders as well as beyond different welfare contexts and academic traditions and to engage at the same time with the specific characteristics and challenges of the local context in which concrete and meaningful responses must be given to increasingly disembedded social phenomena and problems. Herein also lie the future challenges for social work: to not withdraw from the engagement with social and political issues, to interfere in the local development of policies and practices and to further develop transnational and international spaces of thought and action for social work practice, education, and research.

The challenges of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and its longer-term consequences in terms of rising inequalities clearly illustrate the need for collaboration, cross-sector and cross-border coordination, the exchange of knowledge and expertise. Social work has a role to play in this context which will not end with the (hopefully as soon as possible) overcoming of this pandemic. The need for eco-social transformations, the challenges of exclusionary approaches to social solidarity as well as social and territorial inequalities must be on the agenda of a profession and discipline which not only carries the social in its name but expresses it in its self-understanding and in its *modus operandi*.

The chapters contained in this edited volume are based on contributions to the conference held on the 21st and 22nd November 2019 at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Social Work degree programme. Social work is a broad and diversified field and like the conference programme this book offers a collection of very different contributions on various topics. Many thanks to all authors who have contributed to it.

We also want to thank our students, graduates, and colleagues in social work practice, education, and research as well as service users, fellow scholars, professionals, and activists who challenge and engage with social work and its agenda as partners and critical friends.

Ad multos annos!

Susanne Elsen and Urban Nothdurfter