**The DNA of Social Work as a Human Rights Practice from a Frontline Social
Workers' Perspective in Flanders**

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Abstract

Societal and political developments in European welfare states challenge the core principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity that underpin social work. At the same time, however, in many European countries, there is a revival of a more transformative social work discourse aimed at the fight for social justice and the realisation of human rights. Gaining insight into the implementation of this human rights approach in social work requires that it be studied in everyday practice, since rights are not rigid structures but social and political constructions. In Flanders a two-year research process was therefore set up with frontline social work practitioners to explore the common ground of diverse social work practices in realising a rights-based practice. Through a qualitative analysis of these frontline perspectives, complemented with input from diverse stakeholders, we identified five building blocks as the DNA of a strong social work focusing on the realisation of a rights approach: (1) politicising work, (2) proximity, (3) process logic, (4) generalist practice, and (5) working in a connecting way.

Keywords

Human rights, social justice, solidarity, frontline social workers' perspective

Introduction

An increasing body of scholarship in the domains of social work and social policy reports remarkable shifts and changes in welfare paradigms during the last three decades (Lorenz, 2016, 2017; McDonald & Marston, 2005). The last twenty to thirty years have been characterised by

the rise of more individualistic discourses minimising collective responsibility for social problems and resulting in the erosion of the state's active role as guarantor of welfare, which had characterised European welfare regimes in the decades after the Second World War (Lorenz, 2016; Marston & McDonald, 2012; Young, 2011). These societal and political developments in European welfare states challenge the core principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity that underpin social work and are embedded in the Global Definition of Social Work (IFSW, 2014). However, referring to the Global Definition, we also see in research and practice in many European countries the revival of a more transformative social work discourse aimed at the fight for social justice and the realisation of human rights (Boone, 2018). Because of the social agenda described in the Global Definition, social work cannot distance itself from social, political and historical processes, evolutions and contexts, but needs to take a position on these developments (Lorenz, 2016).

We report on a research project in Flanders where the search for a social work position in the face of these evolutions was addressed. In collaboration with the Flemish Minister for Welfare, Public Health and Family and with the Department of Welfare, Public Health and Family, the three Flemish master programmes in social work organised a nearly two-year research project in which frontline practitioners and other stakeholders debated the position of social work in society and the realisation of rights-based practices. This led to a social work conference in May 2018 at which social workers came together to discuss what it means for social work to put social justice and the realisation of human rights forward explicitly as the spearheads of social work and to clarify the so-called DNA of social work.

We discuss the results of this research project. We first explain how human rights as a compass for social work was understood. Second, we describe the trajectory to the conference and situate

the research methodology. Third, we present our research findings in terms of five building blocks that were defined as the DNA of social work. Finally, we formulate some recommendations.

Human Rights as a Compass for Social Work

Human rights are often seen as vital to all forms of social work practice (Hugman, 2013). However, as human rights are social and political constructions, interpreting human rights is a core task for social work (Ife, 2001; Reynaert, Roose, & Hermans, 2018). In our research project, we argued for a perspective on human rights, being a compass for social work, that has a dual function (1) guaranteeing human rights and (2) realising their social political dimension.

Guarantee Function of Human Rights

The first function of rights refers to guaranteeing access to their content (Hubeau, 1995). For instance, the right to social support is a lever for realising access to social services. As such, many social workers are engaged in ensuring these rights on a daily basis. This may include ensuring a reference address for homeless people, obtaining an increased contribution towards medical expenses or performing a social survey in furtherance of the allowance of a living wage.

However, a sole focus on this legal guarantee function is not enough, as it entails the risk that rights are seen as a purely individual matter. Dean (2010) refers in this context to ‘thin needs’, i.e. what is needed to survive. These thin needs are linked to a contractual, liberal-individualistic approach to citizenship (Roets, Dean, & De Bie, in press). Here, the citizen is constructed as an autonomous and rational subject who voluntarily enters into a social ‘contract’ with the state,

with the guarantee of protection, order and rights for the individual being subject to a number of obligations (Carey, 2003; Roets et al., in press). The scientific debate on non-take-up, defined as a situation where individuals or households do not receive the benefits or rights they are entitled to (Van Oorschot, 1998) demonstrates that when citizens are considered as autonomous and rational subjects of law, this might enhance further exclusion from social rights and benefits. This narrow perspective on non-take-up implies that citizens are perfectly capable and have the necessary information to realise their rights and to find access to the necessary services. However, critical studies argue that non-take-up is about deficiency, passivity or disadvantage but can also refer to an individual's indifference, disagreement and rejection of the system (Warin, 2014). In sum, studies argue that several barriers at the level of the relationship between the client and social worker, the organization and policy causes the non-take-up of social rights (Reijnders, et al., 2018). A too narrow perspective on non-take-up causes serious tension in the human rights project, which aims at the protection and development of the human person, while being grounded in a view that simultaneously produces criteria for the exclusion of people in highly vulnerable situations who often have few available choices and resources and cannot meet the expectations imposed on them (De Vos, 2013; Lister, 1997). As such, the scientific debate on non-take-up has the potential to promote a wider debate which looks collectively at both the social and political consequences of public decisions and policy change, placing firmly at its centre the interests of service users, particularly those on the margins of society who are most at risk of missing out (Warin, 2014).

Social-political Function of Human Rights

Social work therefore also needs to go beyond a legalistic understanding and engage with a sociopolitical reading of human rights, addressing the question: how can we shape society in

such a way that human rights and social justice are realised? For social workers, this encompasses attempts to intervene in the structural living conditions and the available social resources in order to enable everyone to lead a dignified life. In this vein, Dean (2010) introduces the concept of ‘thick needs’ as a more comprehensive sociopolitical understanding of needs. In an optimal sense, thick needs refer to what we require not merely to survive but ‘in order to flourish as fully fledged human beings’ (Dean, 2013, p. 3). A thicker understanding of human needs embraces the social context that sustains our human dignity and is embedded in a solidaristic citizenship discourse in which the aim of social policy is to promote social justice and social equality (Dean, 2010). A solidaristic understanding of rights (Dean, 2013) implies that social workers must develop a substantive right to care and support rather than applying a minimalist translation of these rights (Roets et al., in press). In the same vein, Gibens (2013) refers to a structural ‘rights thinking’ approach, in which human rights serve as a lever to constantly assess ‘the larger social and political issues that create and sustain the conditions that produce clients, their problems and their social workers’ (Witkin, 1998, p. 198). The sociopolitical function of human rights implies that social work reaches beyond (re)mediating strategies in individual situations so as to operate collectively from its public role. This collective learning involves balancing between the rights and aspirations of individuals and collective and public interests, aiming at a greater equality of opportunities for individual action for everyone in society through an appeal to solidarity (De Bie & Vandenbussche, 2017).

Realising a Rights-based Practice

Social workers are often confronted with ‘challenging’ or ‘complex’ problems and operate in an arena where various actors with different and often conflicting interests, ideas and solution strategies intersect (Cools & Raeymaeckers, 2017). Within this context, one of the main tasks

and challenges for social work as a form of political and public action is to realise rights in a connecting practice and to include the perspective of as many relevant actors as possible. This leads to our central research question, underpinning the project on the DNA of social work: ‘How does social work realise a rights-based practice?’ In order to gain insight into the actual implementation of this human rights approach to social work, it is necessary to study this in everyday practice, since rights are not rigid structures but take shape in local contexts and concrete situations (Evans & Harris, 2004; Lipsky, 1980; Marston & McDonald, 2012; McDonald & Marston, 2005; Roose, 2006; Spierts, 2017). We therefore set up a research process with frontline practitioners and stakeholders to explore how they could realise a rights-based practice.

The Research Process to the Conference

In the research process that prepared for the conference we adopted an exploratory qualitative research approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) to address the question of future-oriented social work based on a human rights approach. Throughout the research process, the steering committee – consisting of the three promoters from the master's degree programmes and the project employee (being the authors of this article), the workgroup chairpersons, representatives of the Flemish Social Work Programmes, the Department of Welfare, Public Health and Family, the cabinet of Minister Vandeurzen and Sociaal.net – served as a basis for reflection on making decisions concerning strategies of data collection and analysis.

Strategies of Data Collection

The central part of the research project consisted of collaborative work with professionals in which we explored the perspective of frontline workers. It is important to bear in mind that in Flanders social work is neither a protected profession nor a clearly defined field of work. It can include many different practices, such as case work, youth work and community development.

Hence, the frontline practitioners came from a variety of sectors and practices, with the common characteristic that they all stated that they were engaged in realising the values of social work as formulated in the Global Definition. In October 2016, we published an open call for frontline workers on Sociaal.net (an online platform focusing on social work, welfare and health topics) to participate over the course of one year in a collaborative research process in preparation for the social work conference, with the aim of gaining insight into the local, situated experiences and analyses of frontline workers. Of the more than 200 candidates, we eventually selected 120 practitioners, using a maximum variation selection criterion (Patton, 2002). In the selection we aimed for a sufficient regional spread, as well as a balanced gender ratio, a diversity of age categories, representation from a variety of practices, ethnocultural diversity and user representation. We formed seven workgroups according to a certain degree of commonality with regard to sector/target group in order facilitate the process of exchange. The seven workgroups were (1) directly accessible social work, (2) social work and children/young people, (3) social work and support of socially vulnerable adults, elderly people and people with disabilities, (4) social work and justice, (5) social work and integration, (6) social work and labour, and (7) social work and transition. Each workgroup consisted of 15-20 members and was chaired by a lecturer in social work training, who held a neutral position going beyond the interests of sectors. An external reporter compiled an account of every workgroup meeting, resulting in 35 workgroup reports as all workgroups met five times for three hours in Brussels between February and October 2017. The meetings were organised around the following

themes: (1) human rights as the central framework for social work, (2) individual support and building to society, (3) diversity and social work, and (4) the strengths and (5) opportunities of (future-oriented) social work.

On the basis of the input of these practitioners, we invited stakeholders to discuss in panels a number of important strengths and challenges for future social work that emerged from the preceding workgroup meetings with the practitioners. The stakeholder panels consisted of representatives from civil society organisations, umbrella organisations, user organisations, governments and educational institutions. The aim was twofold: (1) validating the most important insights and findings from the workgroups; and (2) making the transition to recommendations for policy, practice, education and research. Four stakeholder panels took place, each of which took half a day and was extensively documented.

Strategies of Data Analysis

Following the workgroup meetings, we undertook a transversal analysis of the 35 meeting reports of the seven workgroups. The data were analysed in an inductive and exploratory manner based on a qualitative content analysis (Wester, 1987). More concretely, we performed a conventional thematic content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), defined in the literature as ‘any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings’ (Patton 2002, p. 453).

Based on this first broad analysis, we identified four building blocks for future-oriented social work: 1) politicising work: social work as a democratic practice; 2) connecting with the living environment of service users through proximity and easy access; 3) the process logic of social work; and 4) generalist and connecting social work. We summarily documented these four

building blocks on the basis of the workgroup discussions in a concept paper, which formed the starting point for the stakeholder meetings. Based on the consultation of a variety of stakeholders, the fourth building block was split into ‘generalist practice’ and ‘working in a connecting way’.

In the second analytical phase, the meeting reports (of both the workgroups as the stakeholder meetings) were analysed more in depth by engaging in a directed approach in which the theoretical and empirical perspectives ‘were very actively fused’ (Goodley, Lawthom, Clough, & Moore, p. 64). As such, we used empirically-based feedback loops, moving back and forth between the frontline practitioners’ and stakeholders’ narratives and diverse social work theories (Emerson, 2004) to give body to the identified five building blocks for future-oriented social work based on a human rights perspective: (1) politicising work, (2) proximity, (3) process logic, (4) generalist practice, and (5) working in a connecting way. Moreover, the five building blocks were documented in greater detail with examples from more diverse practices and additional illustrations supplied by the stakeholders. We wrote an extensive report in Dutch, which was published online (<https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/sociaal-werk-conferentie-sterk-sociaal-werk-eindrapport>). For this article, we selected quotes which are not singular cases, but rather an illustration of multiple and different expressions of the same meaning.

Social Work under Pressure

During the research, both the frontline workers and the stakeholders addressed contemporary tendencies in society and policy that put social work under heavy pressure. Firstly, there is a decrease in social and political support for collectivising problems and tackling structural mechanisms that are the basis of social exclusion. Practitioners stressed the tendency to individualise social problems, for example the problem of poverty is translated into problems

of bad parenting, there is a strong commitment to activating job seekers in a controlling manner ('because there are so many vacancies'), debts are regarded as overspending even though people have to survive on an income below the poverty line. The politicising task of social work is under pressure. Social workers always fulfil different roles, such as an executive role aimed at implementing policy and an autonomous, creative role. However, frontline workers are experiencing being reduced to policy implementers, even though social work is not only subject to policy, but also shapes it (Evans & Harris, 2004). Although social work has historically always developed from the tension between elements of control and emancipation (Powell, 2001), in society today the balance is threatening to shift to integration and adaptation – especially with regard to unemployed citizens and the beneficiaries of financial allowances or social financial benefits – at the expense of a more emancipatory agenda in respect of social justice and equality (Leskosek, 2017). Secondly, practitioners referred to the increased case- and workload and the large administrative burden, which reduce the available time and space to work on the basis of the identified building blocks. Practitioners testified about technical and managerial discourses gradually taking the upper hand (Marston & McDonald, 2012) at the expense of a proximity policy. The social workers in the workgroups mainly referred to the imbalance between their basic tasks and accountability obligations. Thirdly, many social workers operate in a context of scarcity. The current policy trend of strengthening 'big society' through community care brings this field of tension even more strongly into the picture. Community care requires strong social work based on the idea of complementarity between formal and informal care. However, complementarity is degenerating into subsidiarity due to the scarcity of resources for care, which is reflected in the waiting lists in a number of sectors. Social workers exposed the perverse effects of this evolution, for example exhausting the informal social network to reduce the appeal for professional care and support.

These tendencies encouraged the social workers and stakeholders in the research project to define and strengthen key characteristics of social work which would counteract them and their detrimental effects, in exploring ways of realising social work from a social justice perspective.

The DNA of Social Work in Five Building Blocks

Although we explain and illustrate the building blocks separately in this article, it is precisely their intrinsic interwovenness that makes up the specificity and strength of social work practices. In certain contexts, some building blocks may seem more obvious than others. However, the continuous effort by social workers to create space for practices in which the five building blocks converge characterises the core of social work. As such, the building blocks form the DNA of social work as a human rights practice.

Politicising Work

During the discussions in the various workgroups, it became clear that social workers consider politicising work an inherent part of their daily practice. They see this politicisation as going beyond strengthening the social position and well-being of people in vulnerable situations to striving for a more socially just society (d'Hertoge & Van Oyen, 2017; Jansson, 2014). In light of the first, social workers aim to realise rights for their users on an individual level in daily situations. It concerns the so-called social-administrative assistance and services whereby individual access to social services is realised (Oosterlynck, 2017; Weiss-Gal, 2017):

In our housing project we work with right detection, which means that in an initial interview we check their rights and whether they make already use of them, since people

are often not aware of their rights and don't know how to realise them. The social worker then takes the necessary steps and establishes contact with the providing services. (workgroup 5)

However, it was argued that social work picks up individual needs and questions and tries to formulate an answer to problems that are in fact far too large and complex for social work (for example poverty, social exclusion, migration, criminality) and impossible to solve through social work interventions. The causes of these problems often lie in structural factors and it is an inherent part of social work as a policy practice to keep the problems in view (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2013; Roose, 2017). Here, practitioners stated that social work as a human rights practice brings social processes, patterns and rules into the picture to question them and change the situation in the direction of greater respect for human dignity:

It is not our job to teach people how to deal with their limited resources or few opportunities. We must raise this issue and try to change it. This is the core of social work. (workgroup 3)

Social workers are pre-eminently political and social actors who act as intermediaries between the public sphere and the diversity of concrete private lifeworld processes (Schietecat, Roets, & Vandenbroeck, 2017). Social work collectivises social problems and realises its social justice agenda by formulating and defending rational and well-targeted policy demands that are informed by the day-to-day experiences of social workers who work with service users on an individual basis (De Corte & Roose, 2018). As such, social work as a policy actor can question, carry and create the structures in which it develops strategically. In the workgroups, examples emerged of policy-oriented activities (Almog-Bar, Weiss-Gal, & Gal, 2015; Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2013) aimed at influencing the development, implementation or evaluation of social policies (Jansson, 2014), but also pointing to the responsibility of social work itself. These activities are very diverse: training other social actors on social exclusion, writing substantiated policy

documents, setting up emancipatory learning processes with groups in vulnerable situations, organising dialogue between social actors and groups in vulnerable situations, organising new innovative practices that challenge the existing order and taking social action to denounce inequalities. In all these practices, social workers operate as public and democratic professionals who make their voices heard in the public forum, name social obstacles, dare to question dominant thought patterns and take their own position from the normative values of the profession. It is about creating space for other future stories and alternatives that question the existing order and about contributing to the debating of fundamental public differences about how we live together (Oosterlynck, 2017). As such, social work as a policy practice considers the entire policy process as an open-ended and democratic practice in which they might intervene in a variety of ways using different strategies to realise their social justice mission and to transform the needs, experiences and demands of vulnerable groups within society into issues for broader public debate (De Corte & Roose, 2018).

Proximity

A second building block refers to being engaged in the lifeworlds of service users. Human dignity is perceived by practitioners as an intrinsically subjective notion, reflecting a complex interplay between individual aspirations and systemic forces (Roets, Roose, & Bouverne-De Bie, 2013). They therefore highlight the need to go beyond the observable and measurable functioning of people and to engage with the lifeworlds of service users as reference points (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009), recognising that a person's needs, aspirations and capabilities are shaped by interactions between individuals and their social and material environments and the available resources:

You have to come into the reality that people have to deal with. For example, having contact with someone who has to survive for one month without money after leaving prison sheds another light on the situation of detention. (workgroup 4)

As such, professionals challenge taken-for-granted institutional problem constructions that exert an alienating and colonising influence on people's everyday experiences (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009) by engaging with the complexity and ambiguity of the lifeworlds in which service users operate.

Real accessible social services were identified by the practitioners as a pivotal condition for enabling proximity. This means getting rid of as many physical, organisational, social, cultural, emotional, psychological and financial thresholds as possible. Accessible services are affordable (financial aspect), physically accessible, available (conditional admission requirements and relational component), understandable (unwritten rules) and useful (meaningfulness). This requires a flexible framework and engagement with balancing unexpected questions and ambiguous situations, in which relational work and structural work are inevitably entangled. A proximity policy moreover implies that social workers are present in the living environment of people in vulnerable situations, which can be the home situation, but also the neighbourhood, the school and service centres:

The realisation of rights requires basic work, proximity, building relationships, meeting unconditionally, being accessible and free of obligations. It involves, for example, hanging up the laundry together or sitting in the doctor's waiting room for two hours together with your client. (workgroup 3)

Prompted by the compelling question of whom they reach and whom not, social workers considered outreaching and location-oriented working as indispensably part of their practice. In this vein, a plea was made in the workgroups for more flexible and versatile workplaces.

Process Logic

A third building block stresses a process instead of a product logic. Respondents referred to the importance of participation and their ability to deal with complexity and uncertainty (Van den Eeckhaut & Wilms, 2016), as illustrated in an arts-based practice that initially invited homeless people for a bowl of soup and from there on set out the contours of an art project in consultation with them, which implied engagement and flexibility:

Through many talks, it became clear that music was very important to them. But it was difficult to find common ground concerning the genre. Eventually, we moved towards Free Jazz as everyone could subscribe to that. It was trial and error, because at the same time you bring all those problems in: people who were psychotic, who had traumas or a drug and/or drinking problem. We could not solve that. Moreover, if you forbid drinking during repetitions, no alcoholic will come. You need to find a way in between and sometimes it goes wrong. (...) But those guys who had given up society gained energy those Sundays: they had eaten, they were not alone, they made music, they got self-worth, ... And also the perception of the regular residents changed: first they joined for the workshop with the famous artist, but in the end they came for the group.
(workgroup 7)

This illustrates how a process always tends towards the (re)arrangement of the social (Ley, 2013). However, it is impossible to define this rearrangement or transformation beforehand (Biesta, 2009), as the process is in a sense always experimental and the outcome is unpredictable:

We have to work with uncertainty and always have a willingness to take up the engagement of being on the road together with the client or that person, in a kind of equality, without falling into desperation because you have no end goal. If you allow things to be determined by people, then you do not know where you will end up. It cannot be controlled completely. But if everything is clear in advance, then you cut out the pedagogical dimension and then it becomes irresponsible. (workgroup 2)

Practitioners clarified that the imposition of reality definitions by third parties is meaningless because it does not connect with the people who are involved in the concrete situations. As such, they engage in a joint construction of problem definitions and the participatory shaping of assistance and policy processes in which all actors involved play a role from the outset (Noordegraaf, 2004).

A process logic does not imply that results disappear from the scene. It does mean, however, that these results are formulated in terms of a reconfiguration of the social order according to the logic of equality, social justice and human dignity, in which new ways of being and acting exist and new identities come into play (Biesta, 2011). As such, this process logic is difficult to grasp on the basis of classical accountability mechanisms such as cost and success. The workgroup members therefore resolutely called for the development of alternative accountability mechanisms that do justice to the specificity of social work.

This process logic is not only expressed in working with individual situations but can also take place on a group or neighbourhood level. In this vein, it is also characterised by the development of socially innovative initiatives such as urban agriculture, social grocers, gift squares, community land trusts, alternative living forms or repair cafés. Such initiatives contribute to a

sustainable transition of society and point to the laboratory and experimental function of social work.

Generalist Practice

A fourth building block refers to social work as a generalist practice, which is considered to make possible a holistic view of service users' situations in which they pay attention to all different life domains, such as material and financial situation, education, work, physical and mental health, housing and social relations (Blom, 2004; Perlinski, Blom, Moren, & Lundgren, 2010). However, there is a clear trend within social work to divide the social services into specialised units and functions (Bernler & Johnsson, 2001). Although the practitioners in the workgroups agreed that specialisation might offer an opportunity to provide in-depth knowledge on very specific, complicated service users' problems (Ellem, Wilson, & Chui, 2012), they emphasised the historically generalist roots of social work as still definitive of their work (Blom, 2004).

The social workers reflected on their generalist perspective in terms of perceiving people as a whole, mapping out both positive and negative elements from different life areas and trying to explore together with service users what they want and can change. From a generalist approach, social workers continue to have an eye for the complexity of problems in the broader context in which people are situated, in which both material living conditions and immaterial needs and the connection between them are recognised. However, this integral perspective is certainly not the same as an approach in which the service user is required to discuss all life domains in a standardised or routine manner according to a predetermined conversation routine, since a strong pre-structuring can generate the perverse effect that people in the most vulnerable

situations drop out when they are attacked with all kinds of questions about their situation. First and foremost, the practitioners give space to the service user to talk about matters that they want to discuss, which implies that there might also be information which he or she does not want to discuss:

I never come in as the expert, the person who knows what should happen or the professional. We always have to start from scratch. We do not have a passe-partout from previous situations. We work as carefully as possible and do not make big statements, but rather figure out with the service user what is important. (workgroup 3)

Social work as a generalist practice means that practitioners work at the crossroad of all sorts of problems. As such, the social worker acquires a broad spectrum of knowledge and skills and is capable of finding solutions that touch upon a number of societal spheres (Blom, 2004):

The focus of our organisation is the leisure time of children, but in the meantime, we come in contact with a broad range of problems, varying from tax letters to justice, ... And that's why we have to know the social map very well, have a network, ... to be able to refer in the right way. (workgroup 2)

Practitioners in the workgroups referred to the social worker as a bridge figure who operates in a network of organisations and supports persons in a vulnerable situation through this process. In other words, social workers are, by definition, counsellors, case managers and care coordinators who have a good knowledge of the diversity of social services and actively engage in networking with other social workers and professionals (Raeymaeckers, 2016).

Working in a Connecting Way

The last building block was seen as working in a connecting way:

Social work makes connections between people who are or are not in a vulnerable situation, between services, between service providers, between policy makers and social workers, between policy makers and people in socially vulnerable situations, etc.
(workgroup 5)

Working in a connecting way consists, according to the practitioners' contributions, of three components. The individual component is based on the empowerment paradigm and refers to strengthening individuals or groups to regain control of their lives so as to develop new meaning and purpose in life and to participate fully in society (Van Regenmortel, 2012). The practitioners stressed, however, that empowerment should not be framed as an individual responsibility, but requires a society to provide resources that enable people to make choices and to build meaningful social relations. Against the background of the ubiquitous move towards community-based practices in society, social workers experiment with new methods, for example working closely with buddies, supporting volunteers and organising individual power conferences.

The collective component refers to social workers' effort to support connections in neighbourhoods and on the local level to strengthen social life. In a highly diverse society, it is essential to connect people with different viewpoints, backgrounds and conflicting interests (Cools & Raeymaeckers, 2017) without aiming to reach a consensus (Zemni, 2013). This dialogical collaboration mainly takes shape through the process of undertaking things together,

such as setting up a neighbourhood project, but it can also be about connecting with citizens' initiatives:

The fishing industry is disappearing in an old fishing district in Ostend, so this neighbourhood has to reinvent itself. Therefore, we have set up various initiatives concerning music, food, local economy, etc. in an empty bakery to gather a group of people. Students will interview them about their ideas concerning work, living together, ... The aim is a transition process which is supported by a co-creation organisation and an architectural firm. (workgroup 7)

The third component refers to connecting people with basic societal institutions, such as education, health care and the labour market. Bridges are being built by social workers with other organisations to ensure that groups in vulnerable situations can obtain access. This is not just about ensuring individual access, but also about collectivising problems concerning access.

Conclusion

The research project resulting in the conference reflected a co-creative process, combining a top-down and bottom-up approach in which a coalition was formed between policy, practice, education and research. We started from the Global Definition of social work, in which human rights and social justice are internationally recognised as the normative principles of social work, and aimed at identifying the common ground of diverse social work practices based on the perspectives and everyday experiences of frontline workers. We identified five building blocks as the DNA of strong social work, focusing on the realisation of a rights approach. These

building blocks are not strictly innovative, but rather a radicalisation of former foundations of social work.

Based on these building blocks, frontline practitioners and other stakeholders called on policy makers and on broader society to rethink policy in a more just manner. This leads to more general recommendations, such as the argument that society should provide resources that enable humans to lead lives they have reason to value and enhance their substantive choices (Sen, 1999). However, this implies a specific commitment by social work to people living in poverty, who historically comprise a major segment of social workers' service users (Boone, Roets, & Roose, 2018; Healy, 2001; Hokenstad, Khinduka, & Midgley, 1992). In this vein, a plea is made for a 'poverty-aware approach' (Davis & Wainwright, 2005; Krumer-Nevo, Weiss-Gal, & Monnickendam, 2009) that addresses poverty as a structural problem (Rank, 2005) and a violation of human rights (Craig, 2002; Davis & Wainwright, 2005; Dowling, 1999; Lister, 1998). This approach focuses on the violation of rights connected with the material and socioeconomic aspects of poverty (such as the rights to housing, education, employment and health) and the relational-symbolic aspects of poverty (such as the rights to respect, a 'voice' and full citizenship) (Lister, 2004).#

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Other more specific arguments were developed through the workgroups, for instance that the existing registration and evaluation systems should take account of the specific context and process-based nature of social work. Also, social work often involves complex problems that cannot, by definition, be solved by one single institution. The practitioners advocated a certain degree of integration of the diversity of organisations and sectors in which social workers are employed. However, this integration should not lead to smoothing differences between organisations, since the diversity of organisations is necessary for formulating an answer to the

complex problems of people in vulnerable situations. In order to bring the expertise from diverse organisations together, connections must be strengthened between social workers by creating and investing in networks and partnerships (Raeymaeckers, 2016). The respondents also ascertained that community-based care can only succeed when responsibility for care is shared between citizens, the community and government. As such, community-based care requires a pronounced investment in frontline services that work on meaningful social relationships and connections between people in vulnerable situations and basic social institutions.

In general, the respondents argued for a return to the political in social work (Gray & Webb, 2013) and called on society and the various authorities to acknowledge the social added value and impact of social work. At the same time, social work can only work if policy invests constantly and sufficiently in the building blocks and in the realisation of rights at the various levels and domains. The various governments should continue to focus on assessing policy developments from the perspective of people in the most vulnerable situations.

However, despite the social and political challenges faced by social work and the associated recommendations for policy and society, the five building blocks are first and foremost a mirror and horizon for future-oriented social work itself, challenging frontline workers to reflect critically on their own practice in respect of realising human rights and social justice. Since social work is a strong (political) actor in society, in succession to the conference a social work platform has been set up with representatives from a diversity of sectors, umbrella organisations, support centres and civil society organisations. The social work platform has been instructed to translate the building blocks into an action plan and to engage with the formulated recommendations. It has also received a structural assignment to facilitate dialogue

between the work field and educational institutions and to formulate the components of a research agenda, because throughout the process new questions and challenges emerged which we could not address sufficiently during the research project, for example the digitisation of society and its implications for social work and the concrete actions needed to increase diversity in social work organisations. Although we strived for diversity in the workgroups, both the ethnocultural diversity as well as the user involvement were limited and are considered to require attention in the follow-up process. Finally, the social work platform will prepare a new social work conference in May 2022. #

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