

DRAFT CONFERENCE PAPER

Social Work, People's Assemblies and the Creation of New Eco-Social Contracts

Exploring Reform Pathways for the United Nations

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Abstract

This paper argues that social work, as a human rights profession, is key in contributing to the creation of eco-social contracts. Social workers can contribute by applying their skills and experiences and through working in partnership with key stakeholders. At the global level, social workers and their representative organizations could engage more effectively with UN human rights mechanisms to strengthen human rights review processes and accountability measures. In line with the work of the IFSW UN Commission, this paper aims to scope these mechanisms for avenues of participation and for identifying the role that social workers and national social work associations could play in making them more inclusive. It argues for a larger systemic reform of these mechanisms to better include and recognize people and communities affected by human rights violations. As a means of inclusion, the paper suggests considering various forms of people's assemblies, a proposal that draws on IFSW's experience of co-leading the Global People's Summit, Co-building a New Eco-Social World: Leaving No One Behind, convened in 2022, which led to the People's Charter for an Eco-Social World.

Contents

1.	Introduction	1
2.	Co-building an Eco-social World	3
3.	Human rights governance: The need for a more people-centred engagement	6
4.	Social work, people’s summits and UN reform	7
4.1	Description of the summit process and outcome	8
5.	People’s assemblies as a model for bottom-up engagement.....	9
6.	Enhancing Participation in Human Rights Mechanisms.....	10
6.1	UN-civil society engagement in the field of Human Rights	11
6.1.1	Treaty bodies	12
6.1.2	Human Rights Council.....	12
6.1.3	Special Procedures.....	12
6.1.4	Universal Periodic Review	13
7.	Discussion and propositions	13
8.	Conclusion	15
	References.....	17

Acronyms

CSO	Civil Society Organization
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council
IFSW	International Federation of Social Workers
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
UPR	Universal Periodic Review

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1. Introduction

This paper argues that social work, as a human rights profession, is key in contributing to the creation of eco-social contracts. Social workers can contribute by applying their skills and experiences and through working in partnership with key stakeholders.

Globally social workers engage across micro, meso and macro levels of policy and practice to co-build partnerships that create sustainable change. Social workers are working within communities and governments to address the impacts of complex and intersecting crises on vulnerable populations with a commitment to empowerment, social justice, self-determination and anti-oppressive practices.

The UN as an intergovernmental governance system deals with global issues. One of its tasks is to evaluate local human rights situations against international commitments of governments. For this, the UN relies on national and local level information and inputs. The UN recognizes the importance of partnering with civil society to support its work (UN, n.d. g). Social workers who are supporting people and communities suffering from human rights violation could be relevant partners for this task. However, current modalities of engagement with civil society and non-governmental actors in human rights mechanisms are not sufficiently “people-centered” and obstruct participation of social workers and communities.

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) is the global body for the profession. The Federation and its national members strive for social justice, human rights and inclusive, sustainable social development through the promotion of social work best practice and engagement in international cooperation. The overarching objective of the IFSW representations to the UN is to work towards joint action based on social work principles. At a global level, the profession faces numerous challenges, including major barriers to meaningful participation in UN processes. This is partly because the profession with its rights-based approach, own set of ethics and principles is not well enough known and established in global or regional fora or is conflated with charity-based social interventions or other forms of solidarity in some regions of the world.

Multiple entry points exist where social workers and social work organizations can contribute to the work of UN agencies, in particular those with a mandate to support vulnerable groups. They are also key actors in SDG implementation at the national and local level. This said, and in line with the work of the IFSW UN Commission, this paper aims to identify and explore avenues through which social workers could engage better with the UN's formal human rights mechanisms. This could be achieved, for example, by informing and supporting the UN review of human rights and accountability measures. Human rights mechanisms are designed to monitor and improve human rights practices and promote their realization, which aligns with the key principles of social work. The global definition of social work precises that the principle of human rights is the guiding compass of the profession. Social workers are key to supporting the realization of the human rights of individuals and also the right to development of communities. The rights-based approach to

social work practice means viewing clients and communities as right holders (rather than socially deviant cases or charity seekers) and focusing on human rights violations rather than social problems. This human rights approach to social work enables the profession to “leave no one behind”. It further aims to bridge social and environmental justice. Social workers witness the adverse consequences of misconceived policies, inequalities and adverse environmental impacts on a daily basis. Having social workers’ voices heard in UN human rights mechanisms is crucial for the process to become more inclusive and participatory.

This paper will scope the human rights mechanisms in which the experience and practice knowledge of social workers can be mobilized and explores the need for larger systemic reform of these processes to better include and recognize people’s voices. The proposition is modeled around the IFSW experience of working with UNRISD in co-facilitating the people’s global summit for Co-building a New Eco-Social World: Leaving No One Behind organized in 2022.

It aims to explore the following questions: What are the existing avenues for participation and civil society engagement within the UN human rights mechanism? To what extent are the lessons from the People’s Summit—in terms of process facilitation, aims of inclusion, diversity and the recognition of the different types of knowledges—relevant for rethinking the UN’s engagement with civil society, especially in the domain of human rights? How can social work support this engagement?

Box 1. Who we are

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) encompasses 147 country-members. We strive for social justice, human rights, sustainable social development through social work best practices and engagement in international cooperation. Social workers are working within communities and governments to combat complex and intersecting crises and are key actors contributing to the creation of eco-social contracts. IFSW has been granted Special Consultative Status by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

As the global professional body for social work, the IFSW acts as an inclusive and democratic facilitator of global standards, policies and ethical principles. Each of the Federation’s national associations contributes to the formulation of these standards and is also bound by them, resulting in globally shared values and standards that bind the profession together. Consequently, today there are over 5 million social work practitioners that share the values of human rights, self-determination and social justice.

Source: IFSW 2023b

2. Co-building an Eco-social World

This paper grounds its understanding of eco-social contracts in the UNRISD flagship report 2022 and the People's Charter for an Eco-Social World. The charter is a living document collectively written at the People's Summit for Co-building an Eco-social World held in June 2022. UNRISD and IFSW were co-facilitators of the Summit that engaged 26 diverse global organizations. While the UNRISD flagship report (UNRISD 2022) provides analytically sharp domains of engagement in terms of principles, development model and policy platforms for creating new eco-social contracts and promoting an eco-social transition, the latter incorporates social work imperatives and emphasizes particular values as well as a process of co-building, for which social work skills are relevant.

In social work, the ideas and practices of co-building an eco-social world have been gaining ascendancy in the past decade. Traditionally, social work's perspective is called 'person in environment' which highlights the importance of addressing human rights related concerns within persons and communities as well as the environments that shape their concerns, such as the housing situation, access to schools or experiences of social exclusion. Increasingly, social workers work with individuals and communities impacted by climate change and environmental degradation in disaster relief and capacity building. From a social work perspective, an eco-social approach is anchored in recognizing that those who suffer already from social injustice are those who are more likely to suffer environmental injustice (Erickson, 2019). IFSW has played a lead role in promoting eco-social work by gathering and sharing best practices among social workers and using this information to contribute to SDG implementation (Deepak and Mathbor, 2023). This has happened not only at the local level, but also through our engagement during the UN High Level Political Forum, through the organization of side events and the annual organization of World Social Work Day at the UN. World Social Work Day is celebrated in different locations in the world, and in Geneva convened by several schools of social work, IFSW and UNRISD (Mbao 2023).

For instance, at a HLPF Learning, Practice and Training Session in 2019, we used a social work case study of a group of villagers in Uganda that had been gathering bamboo in a national forest for their livelihoods. This practice was threatening the habitat of gorillas living in the forest, an endangered species. A social work organization identified the issue and provided a train-the-trainer approach for the villagers on growing bamboo outside forests and making biodegradable products out of it to sell. The eco-social approach exemplified in this case study demonstrates that it is possible to defend the economic, cultural and social rights of the villagers as well as protecting the rights of the ecosystem they are a part of.

In alignment with the conceptualization of the new eco-social contract by UNRISD and its network partners, social work is embracing eco-social work as one that encompasses prevention and intervention through practice at a grassroots level that centers the "human-nature relationship around reciprocity, partnership and connectedness...where people and nature thrive together" (Mohamed and Huntjens 2023:3).

The term “co-building” highlights the critically important approach of grassroots collaboration and honouring the contributions and agency of marginalized communities and groups. In the social work profession, there is a recognition that social work practice includes tree planting, cleaning a river or claiming traditional land. These activities are important for supporting communities in realizing their rights to a healthy environment. The fact that the understanding of social work practice has been broadened in this way is due to the strengthened voices from Africa, Asia, Asia-Pacific and Latin America where social work knowledge integrates Indigenous approaches and worldviews (Truell 2023). Their experiences are nourishing a common imaginary of an eco-social social work practice that is increasingly being diffused globally.

The idea of co-building is also reflected in the values undergirding the Peoples’ Charter. In the charter, these values are described as “a basis for forming a holistic, inclusive framework for our everyday relationships and actions” (People’s Charter 2022). These values are:

1. Buen Vivir, love and respect for people and the planet, a concept originating in South American Indigenous movements. It describes a way of life and a form of development that sees social, cultural, environmental and economic issues as integrated and in balance,
2. Respect, dignity, harmony and social justice,
3. Diversity, belonging, reciprocity and equity,
4. Ubuntu (I am because we are), togetherness, accountability and community, an indigenous African philosophy based on people's interdependence and interconnectedness with their environment,
5. Solidarity, equality, inclusion and collaboration.

The philosophy of co-building an eco-social world is also the basis of social workers’ commitment to achieving the 2030 Agenda. Social workers affirm support for, and their role in, realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through sharing knowledge and co-creating solutions for social change and social development while standing against exploitation of people and nature and against unjust structures that allow for wealth concentration in the hands of the few (IFSW 2022b). In 2022 with the adoption of the IFSW policy paper ‘the role of social workers in advancing a new eco-social world’, we expanded the profession’s commitment to a holistic human rights framework that encompasses ecosystem rights and the broader rights of nature, building on the people’s charter.

Box 2. Extract from the IFSW policy paper on the role of social workers in advancing a new eco-social work

“IFSW will work towards

- The co-design and co-building of urgent global action to implement the 5 dimensions of sustainability: people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership.
- Engaging governments and other key stakeholders to recognize social workers as key partners in this global action, with the role of engaging and working with communities as agents of change.
- Integrating the principles of a new eco-social world into social work education.
- Transforming social protection systems from reactive to preventative systems to support communities prior to natural disasters, environmental degradation, and pandemics so they are better equipped to withstand these events.
- Address current and historical injustices that impact people as barriers to their involvement in co-designing and co-building our shared futures,
- Building partnerships and allyship to work with local communities to collaboratively identify the necessary steps for a just and sustainable world.
- Visionary leadership by national associations that create policy and direct practice of eco-social initiatives rooted in the holistic human rights framework.
- Eradicating poverty through creating sustainable economies and environmental and social systems that leave no one behind.”

Source: IFSW 2022a

This recent IFSW policy statement was in alignment with the collaborative work we engaged in with multiple partners to initiate the People's Global Summit for Co-building a New Eco-social World. The summit represented hundreds of millions of people of different faiths, philosophies, rights movements, workforces, generations, traditions and cultures.

The IFSW position aligns with the UN Human Rights Council Resolution (2021) on the “Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment”. It also aligns with nexus approach between human rights and environment as reinforced through the appointment of a Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change. Indeed, human rights and environmental issues are inextricably connected. Climate change is affecting the rights to health, life, culture, housing, food, water and sanitation, self-determination, development, peace and security, a standard of living adequate for health and well-being, and cultural recognition. A holistic rights framework is defined in the people's charter, one that “recognizes individual human rights (dignity and fundamental freedoms), social human rights (civil, economic and political), cultural rights, eco- system rights and the broader rights of nature” (People's Charter 2022).

The framework is based on values and principles: diversity, sustainability, self-determination, participation, and the responsibility to protect and advance the rights of people as well as nature. The aim of the framework is to establish a consensus that balances all rights through participatory engagement in inclusive policies and practices for our shared futures.

3. Human rights governance: The need for a more people-centred engagement

The overarching objective of the IFSW representation to the UN system is to work towards joint action based on social work principles. One challenge national associations of social work identify is the chasm between UN ideals and policy practice. Civil society organizations (CSOs) such as professional associations struggle to engage in meaningful and qualitative participation in UN processes to make their voices heard. The opportunities to participate in UN formal processes are fairly restricted and do not suffice for effective advocacy. For example, the Human Rights Council allows for 90-120 seconds speaking time for CSOs with consultative status with the ECOSOC (Constantinou 2022:305). CSO's inputs are treated as a matter of protocol and there is no engagement or feedback on the input. Moreover, the process of consultation itself is top-down, in which agenda-setting is owned by UN agencies and involves no relationship-building.

UN processes that intend to promote bottom-up engagement are often not sufficiently collaborative and “people-centered” in practice, failing to foster dialogue or partnership. CSOs need a new modality of engagement with the UN. It has been observed by IFSW members that social work is not sufficiently known within the UN as a profession that works with communities, families and individuals throughout the world to co-create solutions to global and local human rights challenges and supporting the eco-social transition that the SDGs aim to achieve. The UN could partner with national social work associations to co-facilitate more people-centered engagements locally and to leverage social work knowledge and skills.

While proposals for creating “institutions that listen better to people, promote participatory approaches while reducing complexity” are highlighted in the Report of the Secretary-General Our Common Agenda (UN 2021:pp) and are making their way into key UN discourses, IFSW does thus far see little meaningful progress in this space. The IFSW welcomes the initiative to “develop a policy that puts people at the center of all its actions and takes into account the impact of intersecting personal characteristics, such as age, gender and diversity” (UN 2021: 72), but without systemic reform that truly achieves meaningful participation of less powerful groups, this will be hard to achieve.

In the absence of such processes and diminishing trust in the UN system, civil society groups across the world have established their own forums which we believe provide a model and way forward, including the previously mentioned People's Global Summit for Co-building a New Eco-social World (People's Summit). We believe that the UN can draw insights from and partner with civil society processes such as the People's summit to assure broken social contracts are transformed into eco-social contracts to overcome current crises.

It is important to highlight the link between aspirations for an eco-social world and human rights. IFSW views the right to benefit from development at a community level (as being stipulated in the draft convention on the right to development) as a bridging element between human rights and co-building of an eco-social world. Active participation of the people (the rights holders) holds the duty-bearers—the states and international community—accountable. Human rights are not only to

be claimed, but there also needs to be a clear assignation of responsibility for the realization of rights. It is assumed that nation-states as duty-bearers and the members of the UN are responsible for creating conditions to realize human rights. Other actors such as civil society and community-based organizations are contributing to monitor how states deliver on human rights and are holding them accountable. Human rights only exist when there is a collective structure to claim and realize them. One of the core moral tenets of human rights is that “I cannot have ‘my’ rights if you do not have ‘yours’, and hence they become ‘our’ rights” (Ife and Fiske 2006: 302), which resonates strongly with social contract approaches such as Ubuntu. In a social work perspective, the promotion of human rights at the collective level relates to a field of work called community development. However, an important contrast between human rights mechanism and community development is that the latter is a bottom-up approach. Primacy is given to the lived expertise and wisdom of the concerned community and their inclusion in decision-making processes. The current framework for the UN human rights mechanism could benefit from such perspective to strengthen advocacy efforts for the realization of human rights.

4. Social work, people's summits and UN reform

Given social works rights-based approach, IFSW aims to achieve a closer collaboration between the social work profession and international organizations that monitor rights. Social work is one of the professions that ensures that human rights are not only legally guaranteed, but also realized through a rights-based practice approach, as opposed to a charity or need-based approach (Mapp et al. 2019). Social work incorporates a knowledge and skill-base that facilitates coping, dialogue, recognition, collective problem diagnosis, ideation and most importantly, co-construction of sustainable solutions (Payne 2020). Social workers are engaged at all levels of eco-social action and could hence be key informers regarding issues unfolding on the ground and for convening partners bottom-up, promoting participatory processes that incorporate the profession's values and nine ethical principles (IFSW 2018) such as dignity, promotion of human rights, diversity, social justice and participation. Social workers understand that articulation between their bottom-up practice (for example their daily work with people and civil societies, operational implementation) and the more top-down agenda-setting and governmental regulatory efforts of the UN (for example policy papers, global agendas) represent a good opportunity for collaboration.

With this distinctive professional background, the IFSW co-led a unique partnership to convene the People's Summit through an inclusive process, which brought about the People's Charter. The process is, in our view, exemplary as a model for the creation of eco-social contracts and presents a way forward:

- First, it enabled a variety of actors to come out of the silos that divide communities to work together and co-ideate and co-construct policies, practices and action based on inclusion, intergenerational respect and recognition of indigenous and grassroots knowledge.
- Second, it involved transnational organizations, movements, federations and coalitions across sectors, professions, geographies and faiths bringing together fine-grained

- knowledge and lived experiences that were mutually recognized and valorized in view of co-constructing a vision for new eco-social world.
- Third, the virtual opportunity of the current digital age was leveraged to invite contributions in a variety of formats including academic presentations, blogs, storytelling, panel discussions, TikTok videos, poetry and research from all over the globe, making it more inclusive.

4.1 Description of the summit process and outcome

The People’s Global Summit, held online on 29 June – 2 July 2022, was initiated by 26 diverse global organizations representing hundreds of millions of people. The Summit gathered people from across the world, bridging movements for justice, “to create new ways to work together for sustainability and quality of life for all” (People’s Global Summit 2022).

The summit acknowledged that, despite the promises made by governments since the establishment of the United Nations, which revolve around peace, development and human rights, significant progress has yet to be achieved. The summit observed that: the challenges we face had reached a critical stage; rights had been diminished, inequalities and divisions had deepened, and poverty coexisted with extreme wealth; the degradation of nature had led to climate change and environmental destruction, resulting in the displacement of millions of people alongside those already uprooted by conflict and violence; The governments prioritized competition over cooperation and national interests over solidarity, and failed to adequately serve the populations they represent. The People's Global Summit acknowledged the inspiration provided by community-led social and ecological movements, as well as the wisdom of Indigenous communities worldwide.

The local interpretation and manifestation of global challenges were expressed during numerous sessions. The lessons from the sessions were consolidated by a diverse core group in the form of a People’s Charter as “a living document and reference point that will grow as the world’s populations share their solutions to our joint challenges, so all people can live with confidence, security, and peace in a sustainable world” (People’s Global Summit 2022). As stated in the People’s Charter for an Eco-Social World, this can only be achieved through co-developing reciprocity and joint ownership of positive change, co-building peace, co-living with nature, co-creating social justice and co-realizing equality.

The process and the outcome are exemplary. The charter builds on diverse voices but expands a common imaginary of a desired eco-social world based on interconnected and holistic understandings informed by Indigenous worldviews (such as Ubuntu, Buen Vivir). It also delineates common values and articulates the rights of nature with the rights and responsibilities of people, as it affirms that a future eco-social world is not possible without equality, social justice, peace and solidarity that are co-realized. Furthermore, it carves pathways for actions that are understood to evolve, “and used in local contexts and culture, while retaining its core values and aspiration” (People’s Global Summit 2022). The Summit was an example of how diverse actors (communities, civil society, NGOs and professional groups) can work in partnership and collaboration to achieve meaningful and sustainable action.

The real challenge ahead though is how to institutionalize this experience, when the organizations that partnered with the event were mainly federations and movements that operate for the most part based on voluntary work and have limited resources to keep the momentum of dialog and co-building. The lack of funds and paid positions of federations and movements begs the question, whether a better resourced organization could leverage the experience of such inclusive mechanisms.

As a result from the summit we would like to make a provocative proposition: The United Nations as a global organization is tasked with addressing issues that transcend national boundaries and that cannot be resolved by any one country acting alone (UN, n.d. e). Could it utilize part of its resources to adopt more inclusive and people-centred engagement as demonstrated by the people's summit in form of people's assemblies, for example in the domain of human rights?

5. People's assemblies as a model for bottom-up engagement

Based on the experience of the People's Summit, in this section we explore people's assemblies as a model to enhance participation in the UN human rights mechanism. Such an exploration is not new. It is interesting to note in the publication edited by Frank Barnaby in 1991 on 'Building a more democratic United Nations. Proceedings of Camdun', Hanna Newcombe (1991) presents a contribution in which she surveys ten major and six minor world community proposals to create a Peoples Chamber at the UN in parallel with the present UN General Assembly, which is a chamber of nations. These world community proposals are grounded in the fact that under the provision of the UN Charter (article 22), which states that the UN General Assembly can create subsidiary organs to help in its work, these would only have the power to make recommendations and could be formed without a formal revision of the UN Charter. The international network for a UN second assembly (INFUSA) consisting of about 100 organizations has continuously lobbied for this cause since 1985. Several other and older initiatives and models (World Citizens Assembly, People's Congress, UN Parliamentary Assembly, World Congress of Organizations for a Peaceful Earth and others) have pushed for a people's assembly to be part of the UN system, with differing modalities of recruiting delegates. These initiatives incorporate forms of people's assemblies that the initiators had seen as an important contribution to the democratic operation of the United Nations.

What makes people's assemblies important? Why do we consider the People's Global Summit 2022 to be a model of civil society engagement for eco-social worlds? Even though after the cold war, democracy emerged as a more prevalent form of government, in today's times the average global democracy index score is stagnating, showing shrinking space for pluralism, civil liberties, political participation and political culture and a decline in the quality of electoral processes and functions of governments (Democracy Index 2022).

In daunting times of multiple crises and climate change, no major countries currently have a national climate plan compatible with their pledges made to the Paris Climate Agreement 2018 (Willis et al 2021:2). In such circumstance Willis et al (2021) argue that "it seems justifiable to conclude that current democratic systems and practices are failing to respond adequately to the climate crisis". The

question then is how to develop effective political strategies to steer eco-social action? In recent years deliberative forums such as mini-publics or people's assemblies have become increasingly influential. Deliberative democrats highlight characteristics of deliberation, orienting politics to the long-term, as deliberation forges the relationship between citizens and political actors as an ongoing process, based on informed dialogue in contrast to a focus on elections and voting intention. The deliberative process recognizes the vital input of expertise -not only technical, but also the expertise or ordinary people as they experience eco-social crises. Deliberative forums aim to counter the unequal expression of power and interests and emphasize the power of the better argument and mutual justification between free and equal participants (Willis et al. 2021).

There have been on-going experiments and initiatives to leverage the benefits of such deliberative rationales. For example, in the Irish case, documented by Muradova et al. (2021), the citizen assembly consisting of 99 randomly selected participants to broadly represent the electorate came together to discuss key policy areas including climate change. Before engaging in deliberation in small groups, they received expert and non-expert inputs and had the occasion of numerous question and answer sessions with selected speakers. The resulting set of policy recommendations was surprisingly "significantly more radical than many expected" (Muradova et al. 2021: 2) and stopped short of being adopted because of two controversial measures. Another example is the Global Call to Action against Poverty as part of the Global Week to ACT4SDGs (Act for the SDGs) between the 10-25 September 2023. This call mobilized people in 34 countries at the SDG mid-point to demand advancement on SDG 4 and other interrelated SDGs through people's assemblies that are: 1) organized by communities and wider civil society at local and sub-national level; 2) nominate representatives presenting their perspective at national, regional and global levels; 3) create avenues for participants to identify their own issues and concerns, analyze the structural causes, discuss and develop a set of demands and devise joint steps to address these demands (GCAP 2023). Another recent example inspiring eco-social contracts is the Porto Declaration of eco-social justice and Transeuropa 2023.

Theorists of deliberative democracy encourage to attend to the relationship between deliberative forums (such as people's assemblies) and the wider democratic system with its particular challenges and possibilities of institutionalization. While assemblies can be representative, they differ from procedures associated with representative democracy (King and Wilson 2022:74). More systematic research needs to be done to which extent deliberative forums, such as people's assemblies, are able to amplify power of people and communities that have been marginalized, without bypassing democratic institutions where they exist.

6. Enhancing Participation in Human Rights Mechanisms

The UN as an inter-governmental institution operates through complex, hierarchical procedures. For its navigation, one needs certain social capital, not given to all. A bottom-up approach brings an intersectional advantage and allows for proactive actions addressing inequalities and structural oppression drawn from everyday lived experience (Falk and Strauss 2000). Hence, communities have an important role for realizing human rights. Social workers anchored in communities are pivotal to

aggregate and relay community-level experience and knowledge to feed into co-construction. We observe that communities and bottom-up procedures are nearly absent from the human rights mechanisms of the UN. The human rights monitoring mechanisms include treaty-based committees and charter-based modalities: human rights councils, special procedures, universal periodic reviews and independent investigations. These mechanisms are organized in a top-down modality and shape the invited spaces for participation with an agenda-setting characterized by current power dynamics, making the expression of people with lived experience of human rights failures and abuses at individual or community selective.

We argue that the knowledge and skills base of the social work profession is highly relevant to facilitate a bottom-up engagement within the human rights mechanism. Key social work skills include empowerment, team building, community development, management, culturally competent and anti-oppressive practice, multi-level assessments, holistic interventions and relational practices, such as facilitation, participation and co-design (Ramsey and Boddy 2017:72). One possible form for bottom-up engagement could be the model of people's assemblies, which incorporates voices of diverse communities to co-build an eco-social world and realize human rights. In the next section, the components of the human right mechanism are discussed in view of involving the social work profession in facilitating a bottom-up approach and the scope to adopt the modus operandi of the people's summit in the UN human rights mechanism in view of institutionalizing of such a process with adequate resources.

6.1 UN-civil society engagement in the field of Human Rights

During the 2023 Spring session of the Human Rights Council, members of the IFSW UN commission were sitting in and observing the proceedings of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). The speakers highlighted repeatedly the importance of participation and of the involvement of civil society. As members of the IFSW UN commission, we asked ourselves, were national social work associations invited to inform the UPR in the respective countries? What did participation mean in light of the existing instruments and mechanism of human rights monitoring? How could social work skills be pertinent to enable participation and civil society engagement in the monitoring of human rights?

There are two types of human rights monitoring mechanisms within the UN system: treaty-based bodies and charter-based bodies. The ten human rights treaty bodies are made up of committees of independent experts that monitor implementation of the core international human rights treaties, such as the committee on the rights of the child, the committee against torture, the committee on migrant workers etc. Charter-based bodies include the Human Rights Council, special procedures, the UPR and independent investigations (UN, n.d. b).

In the following we explore the scope for participation in these instruments—only on the basis of the descriptions of the instruments found on the UN websites. From a social work perspective participation means the following (IFSW, 2018): “building the self-esteem and capabilities of people, promoting their full involvement and participation in all aspects of decisions and actions that affect their lives”. The dimension of co-decision-making regarding issues that concerns them is pivotal. We

then discuss the potential involvement of social work and the relevance of social work skills. Such an exploratory undertaking only gives a preliminary impression of the potential or challenges for participation. A deeper, comprehensive and systematic study of the instruments would be required to formulate more substantive claims regarding the scope of participation of people and CSOs possibly facilitated by social workers for the monitoring of human rights.

6.1.1 Treaty bodies

Treaty based bodies are committees of appointed experts that monitor implementation of international human rights treaties. Each committee is composed of independent experts that together attempt to hold states accountable to the treaties that are ratified (UN, n.d. d).

- A committee of appointed experts leaves less scope of participation for concerned people, communities or civil society organizations.

6.1.2 Human Rights Council

The Human Rights Council is an intergovernmental body within the United Nations system made up of 47 States responsible for the promotion and protection of all human rights around the globe, where thematic issues pertaining to human rights that require attention are discussed (UN, n.d. a).

- Mandate holders for specific temporal terms respecting a regional distribution are experts with high credentials and are nominated, selected and appointed through a formal and competitive process. Criteria considered for recruitment are expertise, experience in the field, independence, impartiality, personal integrity and objectivity. A committee of appointed experts leaves less scope of participation for concerned people, communities or CSOs.
- Regarding CSOs, only those that are in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) can participate as observers. This allows them to attend and observe the proceedings, submit short written statements (1'500-2'000 words), make short oral interventions, participate in discussions and informal meetings, and organize parallel events relevant to the work of the Human Rights Council. Such short expressions are mainly protocolled and do not allow for participation that displays deep and complex issues that could facilitate co-decision making. Informal meetings and the organization of parallel events allow for longer and deeper deliberation and expression, but do not formally engage the mechanism in any way.

6.1.3 Special Procedures

Special Procedures involve independent human rights experts with mandates to report and advise on human rights from a thematic or country-specific perspective. Special Procedures give possibilities for country visits, act on individual cases that are characteristic of broader societal concern by sending official communications, contribute to the development of international human rights standards and engage in advocacy, raise public awareness and provide advice for technical cooperation (UN, n.d. c).

- The modalities are expert-led investigations. In particular during the country visits there is a role for CSO in regard to consultations, support to organize meetings and follow-up

activities (OHCHR 2008). National social work associations could have a relevant role to play during country visits.

6.1.4 Universal Periodic Review

The Universal Periodic Review is a unique process which reviews the human rights records of all UN member states. It is a state-driven process. The review is based on three documents: 1) A national report (information compiled by the State), 2) a compilation of UN information prepared by OHCHR, and 3) information compiled from other stakeholders, including national human rights institutions, NGOs and other regional bodies. (OHCHR, n.d. b). The human rights mechanism grounds itself in information that is gathered and then analyzed, cross-checked so that it can serve in the dialogue with the State. It may lead to recommendations to the state on how to resolve the problem and lend assistance to help governments implement them (OHCHR, n.d. a).

- This instrument explicitly mentions NGOs to provide information regarding human rights issues and hence opens an avenue for engagement. However, NGO's involvement as informants does not allow them to shape decisions concerning them or those on whose behalf they act.

7. Discussion and propositions

Having described the UN instruments for human rights, in light of an understanding of participation from a social work perspective, one gets the impression that avenues of participation to bring in the voice of concerned people, communities and civil society organizations is rather ineffective. The potential for co-decision making seems to be low. Investigations and information compilation is led by experts, whereas lived expertise of concerned people and communities are hardly valorized. It is not clear to what extent consultations with civil society organizations such as professional associations of "front line workers" in a position to contribute to the realization of human rights are involved. Further systematic research could shed light on the involvement of professional associations in the process. We argue, that in particular national social work as front line human right professionals could be consulted with more systematically. Documentation on the human rights system (OHCHR n.d. a) states that there are two avenues via which the UN human rights mechanisms can contribute to protect civil society space: First, CSOs can share documentation about their work and findings in order to convey good practices. Well-documented and verified information by civil society organizations is a strong advocacy tool to protect human rights. Second, CSOs are invited to use opportunities for participation in international conferences, meetings or visits of experts. Outputs of UN human rights mechanisms can be used for their own work for advocacy, guidance, and support for local activities. While these opportunities exist, they are not linked to a formally prescribed mechanisms.

In June 2023 the IFSW UN Commission met with officers of the OHCHR and discussed the relevance of social workers to the promotion and the realization of human rights and potential avenues of collaboration. OHCHR recognized the role of social workers in facilitating and co-building ground-up social development and that social work was relevant to expand work on social, economic and cultural rights. Further points included the importance of developing shared

methodologies and language. It was also communicated that at the UN country-level activities should be developed in partnership with the local national association of social workers (IFSW 2023a).

During the meeting, the instrument of treaty bodies was identified by UN officials as an interesting space to involve national social work associations. Hence, systematic consultation with national social work associations to establish the reporting for the human rights mechanisms could be a fruitful avenue of collaboration between the UN human rights system and social work.

The UPR is based on three types of documents (1. national report, 2. UN report and 3. report compiled by other stakeholders). Research (Carraro 2019) on the UPR, ten years after coming into force, shows that in countries where NGOs play an active role to contribute to the third report is able to generate peer and public pressure. Opening another avenue by consolidating the outcome of people's assemblies at national levels could further strengthen the aim to hold governments accountable to human rights commitment. A people's assembly would allow for expressing the lived experience of concerned people and communities to inform the human rights situation in their own words and be propositional about the way forward. Such an institutionalization of people's assemblies by the UN would enhance the legitimacy of local communities already recognized within their local contexts. National social work associations could be key actors in facilitating such a process, as social workers are anchored in communities facing social and environmental injustice, and they have the skills to empower, identify and build leadership and create conditions of equity for people to voice their concerns.

Box 3. Example of bringing the slogan “nothing about us without us” into a human rights instrument

People with disabilities and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons of Disabilities (UNCRPD)

The UNCRPD was adopted in 2006 and came into force in 2008 and demonstrates how human rights bodies involved in the implementation of conventions related to human rights need to maintain close links with the concerned community to actively involve them and give primary importance to their perspective. Achieving this in the context of the UNCRPD was an outcome of the disabled people's movement DPI (Disabled People International) that brought together people with disability from across the world (Singapore 1981) and developed and promoted a social model of disability. This common understanding was a breach with the medical notion of disability and put the responsibility on society (and not on the individual) to eliminate material obstacles and cultural barriers to the realization of the rights of people with disabilities. After years of relentless networking and lobbying the movement was able to tackle discrimination through international legislation. Even more remarkable is the fact that people who were the target group of the Convention, were directly involved in its drafting and overseeing its implementation. In particular the Convention makes reference to the obligation of State Parties to involve civil society and disabled people's organizations in the implementation of the Convention.

Source: Callus and Camilleri-Zahra (2017)

Some recent studies and experiences worldwide are demonstrating the effectiveness of people's assemblies, experimenting with more deliberative forms of democracy at all levels (Renwick, et al, 2022; UNDP 2022). Others describe challenges of making such efforts truly inclusive in terms of institutional design (Gilman and Wampler., 2019) or differing perceptions of stakeholders (Sandover et al, 2021). Interestingly, there is growing documentation of people's assemblies engaging in debates around climate change (Muradova et al, 2021).

8. Conclusion

This paper set out to explore pathways to more meaningful UN engagement with civil society in particular of national front-line professionals such as social workers in the domain of human rights. It incorporates a social work perspective that is grounded in the guiding ethical principles of the profession, the IFSW policy papers pertaining to social work's role in promoting the SDGs and eco-social worlds and the experience of co-leading the people's summit in 2022. The paper engaged with the provocative proposition that the United Nations could invest part of its resources to adopt a more inclusive and people-centered engagement in the form of people's assemblies to assess the human rights situation at national levels.

After a preliminary description of the human rights mechanism by means of the documentation available online, we observed that avenues of participation to bring in the voice of concerned people, communities and civil society organizations that mobilize on their behalf, is rather ineffective. Potentials for co-decision making seem nonexistent. While information compilation by experts and professionals are important, the experience of people who suffer from human rights violations or suggest ways to improve their access to human rights are equally important.

We argue that social workers ought to be considered as partners to rethink civil society engagement generally and in particular in the domain of human rights for the following reasons: First, social work is a human rights profession and a lever to go beyond legalistic understandings and towards substantive realization of human rights by advocating for stronger social services and protection floors, strengthening existing structures of social solidarities, and empowering communities to participate in decision making that concerns them. Second, social work skills, such community development at the meso level paired with advocacy at the macro level are relevant to advance the realization of human rights. Social workers engage in their daily work in multi-disciplinary and professional settings with a diversity of actors to bring them together to valorize different perspectives and co-construct pathways forward for sustainable and collective decision making. In such a process, particular attention is granted to the most marginalized persons, creating conditions of equity for participation. Recent efforts to include and learn from Indigenous practices and worldviews to co-build eco-social worlds are proving to be crucial to substantiate eco-social practices. Third, as the experience of advancing the SDGs demonstrates on many fronts, eco-social worlds cannot be achieved without systems change in every sector (social, economic and political). Social work is versed in macro-level advocacy work and can bring in the perspectives of their front-line work with the most vulnerable members of society into policy revisions and design.

This paper argued furthermore on the grounds of the people's summit that the model of a people's assembly was a promising format for communities to directly participate in discussions and assessments concerning them and an avenue to co-shape the social and physical environments they live in.

In our view, it is promising to explore people's assemblies as a means to contribute to the design and implementation of eco-social contracts. Future research could systematically scope human rights mechanisms in its operational features for avenues of participation and attempt to articulate these avenues with possible forms of people's assemblies. Social workers and national social work associations could explore modalities of partnership with the United Nations and its national offices to facilitate and co-shape the rationales for deeper bottom-up engagements.

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