The Interlinkages between Sustainable Development Goals and Social Work: A Theoretical Understanding

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are universal calls to action that aim to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure the prosperity of all human beings. The 17 goals identified in 2015 were a roadmap for achieving transformational change globally. Social work is primarily concerned with helping people in need and solving social problems. Human dignity and worth is the overarching principle of social work, along with doing no harm, recognizing diversity, and upholding human rights and social justice. The beginning of the decade of 2020 had to face an unprecedented COVID-19 crisis responsible for the considerable loss of human lives and unprecedented collapse in the economy. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all 17 sustainable development goals, showing that what began as a health crisis quickly became a human and socio-economic emergency. The efforts to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic must be in accord with efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and deliver the Goals during the decade of action. Social work professionals are the key and play an instrumental role in achieving these targets. The paper is an attempt to understand the role played by the social work professional in achieving the SDGs and their interlinkages with the principles of SDGs. The paper highlights the new opportunities and challenges social workers can face in accomplishing these goals.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, Social Work, Interlinkage, COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

The term 'Sustainable Development' first appeared in the title of a critical document published jointly by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 1981, titled World Conservation Strategy: Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development. In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), established in 1983, released a report titled "Our Common Future." The 'Brundtland Report,' as it came to be called, established the guiding principles for sustainable development as we know it today. According to the report, severe global environmental problems are caused mainly by the South's massive poverty and the North's non-sustainable consumption and production habits. Sustainable development makes sure that present needs are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet those needs. It encompasses two key ideas:

- "the concept of 'needs,' in particular, the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
- the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs" (United Nations, 1987).

These goals are universal and comprehensively more holistic in their issues and concerns. To achieve these goals, a comprehensive participatory process ranging from high-level panels to open working groups was used in conjunction with numerous consultations. It means integrating environmental, social, and economic concerns into all aspects of decision-making fragmentation in decision-making should be eliminated to ensure sustainable development (Dernbach, 2003).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), often known as the Global Goals, are targets for eradicating poverty, protecting the environment, and ensuring peace and prosperity for all people. There are 17 Goals and 169 indicators. The document titled 'Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' was signed in September 2015 and launched on January 1, 2016. The 193 member countries of the United Nations adopted these goals. Goals and targets will be achieved by 2030. It is the most comprehensive and ambitious global development agenda in the history of humanity.

These 17 goals build on the success of the Millennium Development Goals while including new areas such as climate change, economic inequality, innovation, sustainable consumption, peace, and justice, among other priorities. The 17 SDGs are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Sustainable Development Goals

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	
GOAL 1: No Poverty GOAL 2: Zero Hunger GOAL 3: Good Health and Wellbeing GOAL 4: Quality Education GOAL 5: Gender Equality GOAL 6: Clean Water and Sanitation GOAL 7: Affordable and Clean Energy GOAL8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	GOAL 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure GOAL 10: Reduced Inequalities GOAL11: Sustainable Cities and Communities GOAL 12: Responsible Consumption and Production GOAL 13: Climate Action GOAL 14: Life Below the water GOAL 15: Life on Land GOAL 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions GOAL 17: Partnership for the Goals

Source: https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND SOCIAL WORK

In 2014, the global definition of social work was introduced in the general meeting of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International and General Assembly of International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW). The definition is as follows:

"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by social work theories, social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being" (IFSW & IASSW, 2014).

McKinnon (2008) viewed human development and intergenerational equity as areas in which social workers have done practical and theoretical work for decades. In social work, the term social development is used constantly to refer to human development. Human development is related to human rights, empowerment, and meeting the basic human needs as conceptualised in Agenda 21, United Nations Conference on Environment & Development, Rio de Janerio. As most social workers have known, these three indicators are related to social development.

Social development approaches, also called developmental social work, have focused on building essential capacity among individuals, groups, and communities by addressing essential needs issues (Midgley & Conley, 2010). As individuals gain the capacity to participate in social and economic institutions, realistic social choices are bound to increase. Though this approach is now widely attributed to Sen's theories of functioning and capabilities (Sen, 2000), it had already been part and parcel of social work approaches to community building and development. Social development approaches have a long history in social work and are well-positioned to address human development issues concerning sustainability policies and programmes (Mohan, 2007).

The role of human rights in social work has been elaborated by several scholars (Mapp, 2007; Reichert, 2003; van Wormer & Besthorn, 2010; Wronka, 2008 as cited in Pillai & Gupta, 2012). Human rights provide a new value framework for undertaking social work. Human rights ideals underpin the fundamental values of social work, such as the right to human dignity and the right to self-determination. However, they are not often expressed in human rights terms. The human rights viewpoint is currently garnering broad attention as a universal medium for applying social work tools, given the long history of human rights ideals in social work (Pillai & Gupta, 2012).

The profession of social work is firmly based on human rights values. Human rights norms are assessed at the micro, meso, and macro social work interventions. The Council on Social Work Education and the National Association of Social Workers, in particular, have recently stated that human rights norms and principles must not be infringed. Human rights teaching is also an integral part of the social work curriculum (Pillai & Gupta, 2012). Okafor (2021) writes that the social work practice as

a helping profession adopts skills and theories of human behavioural and social systems in alleviating and resolving social problems that affect individuals, groups, or communities. The role of social workers encompasses different dimensions of social issues.

The principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. The profession of social work is founded on core values and principles that guide professionals to pursue social justice and social welfare. The National Association of Social Workers, USA, promoted the six most popular values. They are service, social justice, dignity and worth, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (Thomas, 2016). Social work values are consistent with the 2030 Agenda: Human dignity, inclusivity, respect, diversity, equality and non-discrimination, empowerment, reliance, resilience, and self-help are common themes in Agenda 2030. Social workers identify with these values for execution.

The SDGs being holistic has emphasised the overall development of all. The motto of the 2030 Agenda is 'Leave no One Behind.' The agenda has its root grounded and principles derived from the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. The 2030 Agenda envisions a world where human rights and human dignity are universally respected, the rule of law reigns, justice is rendered, equality is preserved, and non-discrimination is practiced; respect is extended to race, ethnicity, and cultural diversity; and equal opportunity is promoted to realize human potential and encourage shared prosperity.

This human rights approach adopted in the SDGs, especially in defining the issues and governing implementation, has relevance for the profession of social work. The Human Rights and Social Work Manual (United Nations, 1994) stated that "Human Rights are inseparable from Social Work Theory, Values and ethics, and practice. Rights corresponding to human needs must be upheld and fostered, and they embody the justification and motivation for social work action. Advocacy of such rights must, therefore, be an integral part of Social work, even if in countries living under authoritarian regimes such advocacy can have serious consequences for Social Work professionals" (p. 5). The human rights approach used in the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly defining the issues and governing implementation, is relevant to social workers. It stated that "the more excellent knowledge and understanding of human rights will

improve social work professionals' actions and interventions'' (UN, IFSW & IASSW, 1994, p. 3).

Social work target groups are also closely aligned with those identified in the SDG agenda. These target groups include women, children, youth, the disabled, the elderly, indigenous peoples, the internally displaced, migrants, and refugees. The social work profession aims to provide meaningful opportunities for the social and economic growth of the marginalized sections of society. The vulnerable sections of the society, particularly women, children, persons with disabilities, older people, Dalits, tribals, and so on, are the major exciting sections, helping them develop into self-reliant and productive citizens, thus enhancing social equity. Gender equality and empowerment (SDG 5) and Reducing Inequalities (SDG 10) have drawn substantial attention.

In order to accomplish these goals and targets, professionals engaged in social work play a crucial role. They are innately connected to Agenda 2030 at the national, regional, and global levels. Collaboration and partnership are vital to achieving the goals and targets of the SDGs. Social work professionals are essential stakeholders in achieving the goals of SDGs.

'Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' called for a reinvigorated Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, based on stronger global solidarity, focusing on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable, including the environment, and engaging all countries, stakeholders, and people (United Nation, 2015). Jayasooriya (2016) viewed that human needs and economic, social, and environmental concerns are interconnected through the SDGs. Moreover, he opined that addressing poverty, education, health, economy, and employment as human development concerns would encourage a more holistic and long-term approach to meeting human needs.

The following Table has highlighted some of the social workers' roles in achieving these goals and their embedded targets. Some of the Goals and roles of social workers are as follows:

Table 2: Sustainable Development Goals and Role of Social Workers or Professionals

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	Role of Social Workers/Professionals
SDG 1: It is about ending poverty in all its form.	Community Development: It requires fostering economic opportunities for area residents through industrial retention, local business development, job training, and placement. A social worker's role is crucial as this role requires skills in community analysis, social planning, community organising, and social action (Kumar, 2019). Community Practice calls for social workers to help people discover their resources and create influence and positive change. According to the IFSW, a social worker "combines work with individuals and families with community work, focusing on enhancing resources and opportunities as well as personal capacities [so] that as individuals develop out of poverty, so do communities, and the two become mutually reinforcing." ("Social Workers", 2019).
SDG 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all of all ages	Providing Referral services assessment and counselling regarding health promotion in clinical and multidisciplinary settings. The social worker can employ methods and techniques like family casework, family counselling, crisis intervention, legal aid, etc. can be employed by the social worker for the distressed family and family enrichment program. Rehabilitation: Social Worker helps their client in the process of rehabilitation. It may be Social or psychological, or vocational rehabilitation. Providing health care programs, including prevention programs, and improving the quality of life in a way that is applicable and accessible to all patients and members of the community. Identifying the leading causes of mental illnesses and other diseases provides community-based rehabilitation.
SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	Providing psychological, social, and emotional counselling to the victims of domestic violence. Core social work methods like Social Casework, Social Group work, community organisation,

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	*Role of Social Workers/Professionals*
	ancillary methods of social administration, social research, and Social Action can help bring equality among genders and make women progressive (Bhanti, 2019). Gender Mainstreaming: Professional social workers can conceptualize from this theme and achieve favourable outcomes, ultimately leading to their empowerment and achieving the goal of gender equality.
SDG 8: Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment, and decent work for all SDG 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries SDG 16: Promote just, peaceful, and inclusive societies	Social workers advocate for social and economic justice within the social welfare system, making needed resources available to members of vulnerable populations—children, older people, those with disabilities, and those living in poverty. Microfinance (SHGs for women), skill development, and capacity building among the marginalised class.
SDG 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts SDG 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development SDG 15: Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss	Generating critical environmental awareness among individuals, groups, and communities. Most advantageously positioned for consolidating solid and effective networks and coalition for grassroots actions which may include natural resource-based user groups and associations, indigenous peoples' groups, and other community-based organisations – due to their core foundational knowledge of working with groups and communities and engagement with the core domain of social actions and movements (Agnimitra, 2021). Bringing localised issues to the centre stage can create broader public interests and discourse around them. Key role in upholding the rights of the environmental refugees and victims of disasters, both natural and manmade. An influential role in community-based disaster risk management is essential skills and professional training. Creating community resources by training the community–level workers (government and

Sustainable Develop-ment Goals (SDGs)	Role of Social Workers/Professionals
	NGO workers such as Anganwadi workers, health workers, self-help groups leaders) and volunteers to facilitate the process of rescue, relief rehabilitation, and reconciliation in the aftermath of disaster (Bhadra, 2021). Social workers can play a conscious role in judicial activism with their resolute determination, as it has played an enormous role in safeguarding environmental issues (Agnimitra, 2021).
SDG 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development	Coordination between the various department of government and NGOs. Networking and liaising with the existing administrative, health, education, etc., at the local, district, or state level. Dissemination of information is essential to ensure the effective implementation of policy. It will help make relevant information according to the target audience, sharing among different stakeholders and at different levels. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Supervision. Crucial role in raising the finance and funds for achieving these and ensuring transparency and accountability with the time-bound approach.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSIONALS

Opportunities

Unlike traditional welfare programs, the Sustainable Development Goals are holistic and multidimensional in their approach, making SDGs more realistic in addressing ordinary citizens' concerns. Social work can have an excellent platform because of SDGs' inclusive, cross-cutting approach. The SDGs have a human rights-based approach, and social workers can use this framework to fulfill the goals. The Indian prime minister has endorsed and talked about the importance of social justice and its need on various platforms. He believed in the motto *of 'Sab Ka Saath, Sab Ka Vikash.'* The Prime Minister at The UN Summit for The Adoption of Post-2015 Development Agenda stated that today, much of India's

development agenda is mirrored in the Sustainable Development Goals. The Niti Aayog is monitoring the SDGs in India.

For achieving the required goals and targets, different stakeholders must work closely as a unit.

It is a monumental job to achieve as the world's second-most populous country, with unique geographical and regional inequalities, social inequality, and prejudice. Social workers have an essential role to play. Social workers by profession are change agents. The training and education provided to the social work students in Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) programs help them acquire knowledge and understanding of society, skill formations to make meaningful interventions. These attitutiondonal changes help them to be non-judgemental. Providing social justice to the marginalized and the disadvantaged is a priority for social workers.

To deal with the problems faced by the different sections of the society, especially women and children, marginalized sections Scheduled Castes, indigenous groups, etc. knowledge, and expertise is required. The SDGs talked about inclusiveness. In the Indian context, with its methods and skills, social workers can play an instrumental role. Social work intervention is very viable and an essential tool in enhancing the functioning of the individuals and groups to make them capable of helping themselves with its professional inputs.

Jayassoriya (2016) viewed that the SDGs can provide social workers with a new role in monitoring and enhancing implementation. They can fill the gap in complementing and advocating for a 15-year agenda, goals, targets, and indicators. A professional social worker can play a crucial role in supporting and enabling individuals or communities to gain knowledge of different laws, rights, policies, and programs. They can help explore and mobilize the resources to uplift and raise their standard of life and expression. They can play a crucial role in imparting skill development, helping them gain their confidence and self-esteem.

Challenges

The Pandemic of COVID-19: When the world collectively and maximum member countries individually were already lagging the scale and speed to meet the SDGs, the pandemic struck the world. The COVID-19 outbreak has impacted societies around the world in an unprecedented manner. However, not everyone in every place has been affected differently.

India was one of the worst-affected nations, which made the situation catastrophic.

A joint statement by International Labour Organisation (ILO), Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and World Health Organisation (WHO) in October 2020 stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a significant loss of human life around the world. It poses an unprecedented threat to public health, food systems, and the workplace. The pandemic has caused severe economic and economic disruptions. As a result of the pandemic, tens of millions of people face the prospect of extreme poverty, while the number of undernourished individuals, estimated at 690 million now, could rise by 132 million by the end of the year (ILO, 2020).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in India led to a nationwide lockdown. The pandemic and the lockdown involved restricted mobility of people and goods and services. It has created severe challenges for vulnerable families due to the closure of shops, factories, and offices and restricted access to public services. One of the most significant impacts of the lockdown was the loss of livelihoods, especially in urban locations. As a result, millions of workers across India moved back to their villages. The post-lockdown challenges encompassed practically all sectors, including livelihoods and food availability, health and nutrition, education, and access to public facilities for people. The children were also severely impacted in terms of food shortage, healthcare, disruption in education, and an increase in the risk of child marriage and child labour (UNICEF, 2021).

The requirement of social distancing along with measures like quarantine, isolation has forced social workers to undergo transformative changes in practice with the rapid uptake of virtual technologies. Amadasun (2020) stated that recounting our professional values (service, human rights, and social justice, dignity and worth of people, privacy and confidentiality, the importance of human relationships, and integrity), which COVID-19 has undermined and, in some instances, overturned, it has become increasingly notable that if the pandemic most hurts any profession, it is the social work profession.

The pandemic has posed ethical issues for social workers. COVID-19 and steps to control and prevent its spread, according to the IFSW Report on Ethical Challenges for Social Workers during COVID-19, has limited the services and responsibilities usually performed by social workers while creating new needs and demands. Social workers have battled

and innovated to satisfy needs in dangerous and unpredictable settings while respecting people's rights to privacy and participation in crucial life decisions.

Social inequalities have always been the primary impediment to women's empowerment. In India, gender inequality is a significant issue. Women's social exclusion is a sedimentary outcome of society's social and cultural activities. The caste system dominates our society's gender conventions, regulated by patriarchal rules. Women's enslavement in the name of culture and tradition is widespread in our society. Women from Dalit communities are at the bottom of the social ladder and most vulnerable to caste prejudice. Gender stereotyping is one of the most common and important causes of exclusion because it prevents people from expressing themselves and their emotions entirely. It has resulted in Gender-Based Violence.

Social workers are the change agents. The prevailing caste system refutes the principle of human rights, which is the core of social work. The mindset of dominance and restriction for women challenges their integrity among societies. Social workers have to work through all these challenges and obstacles to promote social justice in its true sense.

One of the essences of government is policy-formation. It provides the framework within which all actions to accomplish an objective are activated—the policy plans for action and roadmaps to set the goals to reach the desired outcomes**.** We have vast regional, cultural and geographical differences. It is possible that a particular region, sect, or community is being favoured by the party, as each party has its own principles and ideologies. This may lead to inequitable access of resources and means, ultimately leading to distress among the vulnerable masses, and a sense of unrest might occur. There is substantial nexus between political parties and the bureaucracies at the national, state, or local levels. Each party has its specific propaganda, which is its priority. This nexus has severe implications and plays a confrontational role in practicing the core value of the profession of social work. Social workers might have to compromise their core values due to pressure from colleagues or senior officials. The regular interference burns the passion towards the work, and in the long run, the person might feel burdened. To sustain in such a complex and pressure situation is mounting, and it affects the competence of the social workers.

The economy is market-driven and run by big corporate and industrialists in the present context. Numerous non-governmental

organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) are being funded. They invest their finances in this organisation. So, there might be a chance that they like to work in particular ways and with the mindset of reaping more benefits with fewer resources. In these circumstances, to uphold social values and ethics is testing a challenge.

In addition, many voluntary organisations are dependent on funding from the public sector or the public, and, as a result, any challenge to the policy may be misinterpreted as being contrary to the government. This might lead to conflict between the two. If the tension escalates, there might arise a situation where the government can curtail the fundings; in the worst scenario, it might get shut down. Working in these conflict situations is a considerable risk of losing integrity and ethics, and the responsibility and commitment towards the goals might be compromised.

CONCLUSION

The post-COVID global situation is significantly different from when the SDG program was established in 2015. The COVID-19 epidemic has now established itself as a global economic driver, resulting in remarkable social transformation. Social workers recognise that combining their bottom-up method with the UN SDGs' more top-down strategy has enormous potential for bridging the gap between official regulation initiatives (e.g., policy papers, global agendas) and practice (such as daily working with people and civil societies, operational implementation).

The United Nations Agenda 2030 is a watershed moment in history, as it is the first time in history that a total of 193 nations have formed and agreed on ONE common agenda. The SDGs are divided into three main pillars: social, economic, and environmental concerns, with 17 goals and 169 indicators to track progress. Although all goals and indicators are equally ranked and interconnected, their actionability differs by country and geographic region. Every change or development must consider the social, economic, and environmental successes equally. For example, no economic aim can be achieved without a significant social and environmental impact.

The profession of social work plays an enormous role in providing awareness, psychosocial support, and advocating for social inclusion for the most vulnerable population. Also, the design and implementation of interventions that will positively impact the lives of the vulnerable population and society at large are the hallmarks of the profession of social

work. As adequately stated by Bess and Collins (2014), a social worker is a professional who works to improve the general public's well-being by assisting in addressing the primary and complicated needs of individuals and communities, with an emphasis on the vulnerable, the oppressed, and poor and those living in poverty. They contribute significantly to the care, support, promotion of rights, and empowerment of vulnerable populations.

The partnership between different stakeholders to achieve the goals was discussed in SDG 17. The partnership is a basic tenet in social work. Being a partner implies sharing knowledge and insights and generating and implementing solutions cooperatively and coherently for social workers. Because all of the goals are interconnected, and social work plays such an important role, an interconnected approach is required.

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