

**Beyond the pandemic:**  
*Exploring social work ethics and values as a contribution to a new eco-social world*

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**Background**

- ▶ Series of webinars organised by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the Social Work Ethics Research Group (SWERG), April-May 2022
- ▶ Developed out of international research on ethical challenges for social workers during COVID-19 in 2020-21
- ▶ With the added urgency of the climate crisis, we need to reconsider what matters for people and planet, and how social workers can/should contribute to co-building a new eco-social world



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**The pandemic**

- ▶ Created *new needs* (e.g. home food delivery)
- ▶ Increased *existing social problems* (e.g. isolation of older people)
- ▶ Highlighted and increased *existing inequities* (e.g. minority ethnic groups)
- ▶ Stimulated *new ways of tackling these needs/problems* (e.g. community mobilisation, digital working)
- ▶ Provided *opportunities to rethink what matters* personally, professionally and in terms of local & global policy (e.g. personal communication; humane responsibility; local and global equity)

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**Our research during the pandemic showed social workers rethinking what counted as ethical practice in a time of crisis:**

- Working outside normal policies and procedures
- Crossing personal and professional boundaries
- Re-prioritising needs
- Developing creative and innovative solutions, often using community resources

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**Aim to explore through regional social work webinars:**

How can learning from the pandemic be used to tackle other crises created by climate change, political conflict... ?

What values and ethics do we need - new values or re-ordering of existing values (human dignity, social justice, ecological justice, earth care?)



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**Regional webinars**

- 6 webinars of 1.5 hours - Africa, Asia Pacific (including separate FarSI and Arab speaking webinars), Europe, North America. Latin America webinar not possible
- 12-30 people at each webinar representing many countries - from Malawi to Afghanistan
- Facilitated small group work considering a series of questions
- Notes and transcribed recordings
- Thematic analysis

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**Questions for discussion used in webinars**

1. During the pandemic, many social workers faced complex ethical challenges and had to rethink how to put their ethical principles into practice.
  - a) How did practising during the pandemic prompt you to rethink your professional ethics and values?
  - b) What did you do differently?
  - c) Can you give positive examples?
2. You have observed a lot about social and environmental conditions in your career as a social worker.
  - a) What is one policy you wish you could change?
  - b) As a profession, with the aims of equality, social justice and realising the rights of all people, what values, policies and practices would we like to see being adopted as a framework globally and locally in context of the People's Global Summit?
3. What examples do you have of social workers achieving social and environmental transformation?

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**Themes from webinars**

1. Ethical challenges during the pandemic causing rethinking of ethics in social work practice
  - Self care
  - Digital working
  - Less bureaucracy, more discretion & creativity
2. Importance of a holistic approach
  - People and planet
  - Working with communities
3. Re-envisioning the role of social workers
  - Seeing social workers as skilled experts in social protection and sustainable development
  - Extending the concept of justice from social to cultural, contributory, ecological

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**1. Ethical challenges during the pandemic causing rethinking of ethics in practice**



- a) Self care
- b) Digital working
- c) Bureaucracy

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**1. a) Self care**

- ▶ Shared experience of the Covid crisis
- ▶ Inadequate employer response: protective equipment, guidelines, authority, workforce adequacy
- ▶ Workers balancing personal and family safety with values of service and justice, and needs of service users. Literally life and death
- ▶ Mental health needs attention
- ▶ Residual effects: “the great resignation”, unrelenting work demands, superficial self-care measures.

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**1. b) Digital working**

**During the pandemic:**

- ▶ Benefits - reducing isolation, but also
- ▶ Disadvantages - how to maintain privacy and make a good evaluation?

**In the future ... should digital be used more frequently?**

- ▶ Empower service users to use telematic tools: *“Governments should allow people get access to more internet facilities”*, Farsi-speaking social worker
- ▶ Prevent “a digital divide”
- ▶ A challenge to improve internal and inter-institutional coordination: *“Social workers need more support and more training in digital devices”*, UK social worker.
- ▶ A revision of the code of ethics in relation to technology and networks.

11

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**1. c). Less bureaucracy, more discretion: rediscovering the ‘real social work’**

- ▶ Not dominant but often implicitly raised in the webinars
- ▶ The vacuum and inapplicability of existing rules: how to maintain services, guaranteeing impartiality, equity and fairness?
- ▶ An overabundance of rules, often changing and contradictory, imposing major limitation in the name of common good
- ▶ Social workers find themselves reviewing the relationship with bureaucracy,
- ▶ discovering the “real social work”

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### 1. c). Less bureaucracy, more discretion: creativity during the pandemic

- Strict, bureaucratic tendencies in systems hindering responses
- Social workers developing creative and innovative new practices to step up to the challenges
- Values and ethics as guiding principles when social workers allowed more discretion and creativity
- Reflections on learning for the future, both in social work and life

13

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### 2. Importance of holistic approach

- a) Holism – people and planet
- b) Holism – working with communities



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### 2 a) Holism - people and planet

#### A HOLISTIC APPROACH

- Interconnection of all elements in the world
- Connectedness with various parts in a society
- Human being as part of the ecosystem



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**2 b) Holism - working with communities**

- ▶ Importance of working with and in communities
- ▶ Contextual challenges of Social Workers relationships with communities including physical and structural barriers
- ▶ Contributions and capacity to mobilise within the context of communities




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**Holism - working with communities**

- ▶ Reflections on relationships with communities - insiders & outsiders
- ▶ Tensions around the role of social workers with communities
- ▶ Emerging communities of Social Workers and potential of new alliances between 'eco' and 'social' communities?



17

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**3. Re-envisioning the role of social workers**

- a) **Role of social workers as skilled experts in social protection and sustainable development**
- b) **Extending the concept of justice**

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**3. a) Role of social workers as skilled experts in social protection and sustainable development**

- ▶ Poverty - solution focused
- ▶ Eco-wisdom - environment focused
- ▶ Activism - profession focused
- ▶ Connection - community focused
- ▶ Education - future focused



19

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**3.b). Extending the concept of justice**

- ▶ *Social justice* - traditionally social workers have focused on **distribution** of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within society
- ▶ *Contributory justice* - marginalised people contributing equally to collective understandings of their experiences and having their resources recognised
- ▶ *Cultural justice* - fairness in relation to cultural and demographic characteristics
- ▶ *Ecological justice* - non-human beings such as animals also have rights, for instance to an adequate habitat



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**Concluding comments**

'There is an increasing number of social workers, including students and new graduates, who aspire to social and environmental transformation. They are our future' (Australian social work academic)

Key messages from webinars:

- ▶ *Holism* - Integration of social, economic, environmental elements to develop ecological perspectives
- ▶ *Global connectedness* - positive sides of digital communication
- ▶ *Transforming rigid boundaries* - personal/professional; in-person/digital; human/nature; social/economic; right/wrong.
- ▶ *Contextual ethics* - challenging western individualism and universalism: taking account of particular situations and drawing on virtues/qualities of character, caring relationships, alongside cosmopolitanism and courageous activism for people and planet. Navigating between micro & macro, local community and cosmos: a 'rooted cosmopolitanism' (Appiah)



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IFSW research report on survey (2020) [www.ifsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2020-06-30-Ethical-Challenges-Covid19-FINAL.pdf](https://www.ifsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2020-06-30-Ethical-Challenges-Covid19-FINAL.pdf)

IFSW ethical guidance <https://www.ifsw.org/practising-during-pandemic-conditions-ethical-guidance-for-social-workers/>

IFSW resource with vignettes <https://www.ifsw.org/pandemic-ethics-a-resource-for-social-work-students-educators-and-practitioners/>

Article in *International Social Work*  
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0020872820949614>

IFSW research report on webinars (2022): <https://www.ifsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/2022-08-18-Ethics-Webinars-Report.pdf>

People's Charter and recordings from Global People's Summit, 29 June to 2 July 2022, <https://newecsocialworld.com/>



22

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**Questions**

**Self care** - When social workers and other professionals behave heroically under impossible conditions and expectations, are they undermining the fight for resources and fairness?

**Digital working** - What ethical values should guide the use of digital technology in co-building a new eco-social world?

**Less bureaucracy** - How much should social workers engage with people in re-building trust in often bureaucratic welfare systems?

**People and planet** - How far does the current social work education nurture a holistic approach in practice? Can "ubuntu" ("I am because we are") or similar values or philosophies guide holistic social work practices?

**Working with communities** - What is 'the community' we talk about, and how should social workers and other professionals prioritise work with communities beyond the pandemic?

**Role of social workers** - What is the potential role that social workers can play in co-building a new eco-social world in partnership with people they work with?

**Extending the concept of justice** - Should social workers extend their value commitments from human rights and social justice to include ecological justice, entailing that non-human entities, such as animals or oceans, also have rights?

**Overall question** - The pandemic has caused us to rethink what we value in personal and professional life, and the relations between individuals, communities and the ecosystem. How can social workers, other professionals and the people they work with reinvigorate and refresh their values to take them forward in co-building a new eco-social world?

23

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**Overall question for breakout groups**

The pandemic has caused us to rethink what we value in personal and professional life, and the relations between individuals, communities and the ecosystem.

How can social workers, other professionals and the people they work with reinvigorate and refresh their values to take them forward in co-building a new eco-social world?

24

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