

# VIENNA DECLARATION ON ECONOMISATION AND PROFESSIONALISM IN SOCIAL WORK

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## Professionalism in Social Work

*Social work is a complex field in terms of theory and practice. It is committed to the advancement of human development and focuses on individual crises and social problems. It secures and structures social frameworks when the challenges of social life surmount the capacities of individuals or groups so they are able to assert themselves on their own. Processes of learning which develop between professionals and clients take time and are normally not linear. The complexity of social work, therefore, cannot be grasped sufficiently via an unambiguous relation between means and ends. However, these aspects have to be taken into account in defining the quality of social work.*

## Economisation in Social Work

*The slowdown of economic growth, an increase in unemployment, higher income inequalities, and higher risks of poverty and social exclusion constitute important contemporary trends. At the same time, the economic is used more and more as yardstick for politics. Welfare measures are directly subordinated to economic goals. Social policy interventions aim at the workfare-ist labour market adaptation of individuals and have meanwhile assumed highest priority. Issues of distribution and social concerns rarely become issues independently from an economic logic.*

*The economisation of social work is guided by the maxims of privatisation and business orientation. It is marked by a retrenchment of state support, the reduction or a non-adjustment of social budgets as well as growing constraints on social work orientations by economic and security logics. These tendencies point to a concept of human beings that emphasises their compatibilities with consumption and markets instead of a comprehensive account of their different and embedded social contexts. Pressures for self-determination, self-responsibility and flexibility are increased while individual rights and systems of collective solidarity are hollowed out.*

*With regard to its focus on education and socialisation as well as human and social rights, social work is challenged more than ever by economic and social developments. Its political function is to defend people with social problems. This is even more significant in a situation where the fundamental meaning of social work is questioned and redefined as a service to serve the pre-defined interests of its funders.*

**Six key challenges for social work result from this analytic perspective and the analysis of numerous documents, cases and conversations:**

## **1. On the loss of professional self-determination of social work through economic principles**

The pressure of cost-effectiveness and competitiveness seems to imply that increases in the efficiency of social work are indispensable. In any case, social work has to prove its utility in economic terms which, given the primacy of the economic, leads to the subordination of professional standards to business goals and the loss of professional self-determination of social work.

### **What is needed: Priority for substantive and professional standards as opposed to economic rationales**

Social work as a profession and discipline has to consistently pursue its professional ambitions and is guided by the best possible ways to fulfil and plan for social needs. Economic rationales have to be deferred in the face of substantive-professional arguments and are subject to a subordinate process of political negotiation. Negotiations on the most optimal implementation of professionally sensible policies and measures should only be started once these policies have been determined and approved, for example in professional advisory boards and committees.

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## **2. On the loss of qualities of social work through a limitation on measurement and standardisation**

A stronger focus on the quantities and numbers in the definition, achievement and evaluation of targets is a corollary of the economisation of social work by its funders. This results in an increasing bureaucratisation, formalisation and standardisation of social work processes and activities in order to generate those data that comply with financing rules and secure the legitimisation of social work.

A multi-faceted approach represents a key quality of social work which also comprises frequent changes of perspective depending on the specific situation. However, social work loses the core of its professionalism when its object and activities are reduced to the latter's measurement and standardisation, that is statically and one-dimensionally fixed.

### **What is needed: An assessment of social work on the basis of a qualitative frame of reference**

A qualitative notion of social work has to form the basis of its commission and evaluation. Capacities and resources of social work have to be increased in order to understand, determine and responsibly implement its specific professional character. Further education and independent research are fundamental in this respect.

### **3. On the exclusion of clients of social work through a lack of resources**

Political decisions resulted in a lack of resources for social work and, subsequently, limitations of support in material, staffing and financial terms. This not only constrains professional work but, furthermore, changes its fundamental orientation.

Increasingly, social workers find themselves in a situation, when distributing their limited resources, to divide clients according to predefined criteria, and to exclude those that are unlikely to contribute to achieving targets and quota.

#### **What is needed: Social work as a resource of solidarity for all people in difficulties and situations of crisis**

Social work needs to take the offensive in countering the rising pressure for efficiency and the thinning out of welfare state support. The consequences of current social policy for social work have to be conveyed and highlighted publicly. It is important to demand and insist on political accountability. Instruments of funding and control which, for example, divide and exclude social work clients via the imposition of quota, have to be scrutinised critically with regard to their social consequences. New ways have to be conceived for social work to function as a societal resource of solidarity for all people in difficulties and situations of crisis.

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### **4. On the deficit-oriented specialisation of social work through pressures of competition and efficiency**

Strategies of economisation are linked to a retreat to core competencies, interpreted as 'more efficient delivery of social work'. Apparent or politically sanctioned cost and competitive pressures lead to a redefinition of specialised measures. This results in 'tailor-made' projects for specific problem situations and narrowly delimited groups of clients. It is the parallel tendency of a deficit-oriented and stigmatising construction of target groups that stands in the way of a critical-emancipatory concept of social work professionalism.

#### **What is needed: Protection of a critical-emancipatory and generalist conception of social work professionalism through cooperation and exchange**

Social work has to confront its broader challenges and reflect its generalist professionalism continuously despite a welcome and growing detailed knowledge of human problems. Cooperation and professional exchange beyond organisations and fields of action are indispensable for the professional and disciplinary self-image of social work. Funders and organisations working within this social arena need to create appropriately favourable conditions.

## **5. On the loss of professional options in social work in the face of the current dominance of administrative procedures**

In a historical perspective, the professionalisation of social work was marked by a clear separation from bureaucratic logics of action. However, contemporary developments seem to point towards stronger linkages between administrative action and professional social work.

The 'double mandate' typical for inherent tensions in social work is subsequently shifted towards an emphasis on control and, furthermore, under the primacy of efficiency, is in danger of vanishing into bureaucratic administration. The one-sided emphasis of aspects of control and discipline results in a considerable weakening of professional options in social work.

### **What is needed: Reflexive professionalism to protect from one-sided instrumentalisation**

Social work has to critically examine its role in the societal context of individualisation, discipline and control, and to develop a reflexive professionalism. It cannot do away with or dissolve its immanent contradictions, e.g. between social and public interests on the one hand, and individual needs on the other, but has to engage with those antagonisms.

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## **6. On the loss of social work's public function of critique and debate in the face of its depoliticisation**

At present, internal discussions and political debate of the clients' social problems face strict time and economic limits which, in addition, are aggravated by intra-organisational hierarchies and the centralisation of strategic tasks. Furthermore, the increasing dependency of social organisations on funders and unclear funding structures forestalls public criticism and collective political action, and can also threaten organisations and staff in their existence.

### **What is needed: Conditions and resources for a public engagement with social problems**

Social work needs more long-term financial security and a professionally based autonomy over the use of resources in order to fulfil its role as seismograph of the social. Comprehensive structures of representation such as umbrella organisations and platforms strengthen the political and professional position of social work.

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