SDGs and Social Work Education – How students’ placements in the Global South can contribute to achieving the SDGs

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Introduction

The universal relevance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their focus on global interconnectedness and interdependencies provides a new context for examining the relevance of international social work and related practice including social work internships in the Global South.

For this reason, we posited the following research question: “What is the role of (International) Social Work within the framework of the Development Cooperation Internship (DCI) programme in achieving the SDGs?”

Our research gives an overview of the interlinkages of social work to the SDGs. We analysed thematic data sheets from placements in the Global South and individual and group interviews regarding the interconnections of social work, Development Cooperation Internships and the SDGs. Our conclusions include recommendations.

Social Work and SDGs

“Social work … 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. …” (Global Definition of Social Work, IFSW 2014)

Social Work contributes to all three dimensions of sustainable development as can be seen from the Global Agenda for Social Work which was adopted in 2012 and includes the following four themes (Global Agenda 2012-2)

• Promoting Social and economic equalities
• Promoting the dignity and worth of peoples
• Promoting community and environmental sustainability
• Strengthening recognition of the importance of human relationships.

Methods and Data Gathering

Data gathering – Translation

Analysis of all 3 steps: Thematic

Results

Analysis Data Sheets 2016 and 2018 – SDGs directly and indirectly linked to students’ placements

Benefits of Placement Perceived by Students

For Students

- Insight into different lifestyles and different cultures
- Opportunity to develop intercultural competences
- Insight into different contexts of social work and social systems
- Realisation of how privileged life in Austria is. Seeing unbelievable inequalities with own eyes.
- Understanding global responsibilities and the impacts of Austrian/EU lifestyle on poorer countries
- Skills (including language skills) and experience that will help in future career
- Importance of seeing social work in the context of the culture, the history and country specific problems and given opportunities

For Host Country

- Exchange of different methods and ideas about social work
- Opportunity to discuss different world views
- Reduced stress for overworked staff
- Recognition from outside of the value of the work being done by the organisation

Exchange of views and knowledge was seen as being mutually beneficial.

Recommendations

Specific Recommendations for the DCI Programme

- Dedicate more time in the DCI preparation seminar to the interdependencies between the SDGs and their direct relevance to the programme. Here it would be important to discuss the holistic and systemic approach of Agenda 2030. Increase the emphasis on reflection in the seminar. In particular the chances and challenges of cooperation of SDG 17 should be addressed.
- Focus on the effect the individual student’s DCI had on the SDGs in the reflection seminar after the internship
- Work closely with civil society and stakeholders in the field of DCI and where there are weaknesses empower individuals and the local community to implement the SDGs.
- Future DCI participants should reflect on how they justify the environmental impact of the programme and be given a tool to calculate their carbon footprint and be encouraged to consider how they could compensate.

Other Recommendations

- Events introducing and discussing Agenda 2030 could be held in different departments in tertiary education institutions around Austria.
- Theories and history of sustainable development should be part of social work education.
- Carry out more scientific work about sustainable development in social work education (term papers, Bachelor and Master thesis)

Reference:


IFSW, 2014, Österreichische Reflexionen über Sozial Arbeit in der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit

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