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## **THINK GLOBALLY – ACT TRANS-LOCALLY? SOME THOUGHTS ON THE PROSPECT OF THE COMMONS FOR SOCIAL WORK**

The current economic and financial crisis within the capitalist system does not only endanger the adequate provision of social services by “social professions”. In the wake of public expenditure cuts for social welfare and due to the utilization of social work for a “what works” agenda social professionals in “western” countries are themselves once again in search of viable alternatives to the existing capitalist system and to governmental regulations to fulfill the functions of social work. Concern about the social impact of capitalism, economic globalization, neo-liberal policies and structural adjustment programmes is not entirely new in international social work. But these matters seem to have become more urgent for the countries in the global North recently. All this is happening against the background of a mature reflection on the fact that the problems social work has to face increasingly transcend borders, while equally stressing the “integrated” nature of the world community. In other words it is appreciated that the “us and them” perspective has to be overcome if we want to tackle world-spanning problems effectively.

Beyond these professional debates on the sociopolitical function of social work, the recent crisis more generally also raises public awareness about the worldwide interwovenness of our lives. It mainstreams reflections on the general negative effects which the predominant economic system has on large parts of the global population when it comes to meeting human needs. Such debates nurture critical reasoning on a global scale about alternative forms of value creation and about the generation, maintenance and distribution of assets and other resources. In particular, the heterogeneous alterglobalist, anti-capitalist movement is on the lookout for concrete, possible alternatives in the fight for global social justice. One basic assumption made during these diverse efforts is that we have to conceive ourselves as inextricably linked with each other.

Within this overall framework one catchword has gained prominence lately: Commons. Its ascent has been topped off by two recent events. First, the awarding of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences to Elinor Ostrom in 2009 highlighted the significance of such forms of socio-economic practice and related scientific scholarship. Second, the World Social Forum held in Belém do Pará (Brazil) in January of the same year launched the global call “Reclaim the Commons”. It presented commons-based approaches as practical solutions to safeguard material and immaterial goods from privatization and commodification and to guarantee access to fundamental resources in a social, economical, cultural and political sense. Within this reasoning about alternatives the term Commons is seen as an orienting paradigm and strategic perspective which allows highly diverse cultural, social and economic practices from around the world to be linked, thus highlighting what is common and public as compared to what is private and state-governed.

Commons are common goods which were created and/or which are maintained by means of natural or manufactured resources – that is, where some commoning takes place – and which are available for its users according to jointly agreed rules. Thus, Commons are not allocated to individuals but are produced and maintained for others in general. Commons cannot be traded but are the collective property of communities.

Looking at the impact that Commons have on individuals and communities against the backdrop of the fundamental principles and general functions of professional social work, two things can be said. Firstly, commoning is supportive to some of the sociopolitical objectives

that social work pursues (e.g. social justice, human development). Secondly, commoning can foster the provision and development of social services. This raises the question of how such practices can be classified regarding modes and methods of social work. Measured against the diverse traits and traditions of professional social work within its historical development it can be said that Commons are more closely related to collectivist or community-oriented approaches in social work – in contrast to (clinical) orientations towards individuals, families or small groups. Forms of collective production and maintenance of Commons resemble developmental and activist practices in social work, rather than remedial forms. With reference to different social justice approaches one can assume that the idea and practice of commoning are not so much loaded with egalitarian assumptions (e.g. as in the work of Amartya Sen) as representative of the global non-egalitarian humanist idea of guaranteeing access to a threshold of decent living for everybody, such as food, housing, social participation, political autonomy, etc. In other words, the notion of Commons is linked less to the idea of compensation for not having something equally, and more to the idea of having and realizing fundamental, non-negotiable and universal human rights.

So far, Commons share a wide range of characteristics with practices which are well known in those community-oriented traditions of social work which feature a critique of capitalism. Similarities between the two approaches are visible if we look at professional practices in social work which conceive of the sociopolitical role of the profession as a formative, practical, engaged and collective endeavor. Thus, in some social work approaches, pushing the development of a socio-economic community is regarded as a means to confront social exclusion and guarantee participation, and as an alternative to neoliberal development and global capitalism within local contexts. In both cases reappropriation of livelihoods “from below” and “from inside” – e.g. within a community framework – plays a central role, aiming at reconnecting the material, economic foundations with the socio-cultural contexts for living on a local scale.

Nevertheless, one problematic point stands out: though all of this might be done within a globalistic consciousness avoiding a unidimensional perspective, such practices still largely remain within a local, regional or national framework. Generally speaking, community-oriented traditions in social work share a core characteristic with the auspicious discourse and practice of Commons within the global or transnational social movement: they mostly feature a localistic bias. Therefore, to develop social work practice, theory and education some questions need to be treated: How can such a one-sidedness and localness be overcome, if we assume that the Commons provide an alternative to solving problems in a global perspective which can no longer be dealt with in a merely local or national framework? What would it mean to think of Commons as trans-local? And what would be the benefits or the prospects for global social work if we develop such a perspective? If we think that the Commons provide a potential to achieve some of the objectives of social work and if at the same time we doubt that localisms are enough to build “another world”, then it becomes obvious that we need to develop a transnational socio-political perspective taking up all the intricacies which can be presumed to exist in between these tensions. To do so, it is helpful to take a look at the ascending adaption of transnational perspectives in intellectual debates in the field of social work.