

# Social work beyond the pandemic: Exploring social work values for a new eco-social world

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## Abstract

This article draws on a series of international research-focused webinars with social workers in 2022. They were designed to examine the rethinking of professional values during the pandemic in the context of other global crises, particularly the climate emergency. Participants readily shared ethical issues relating to self-care, digital working and reduced bureaucracy during the

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pandemic and implications for future practice. The need for holistic, community-based approaches integrating social, health and economic aspects of people's lives arose, and the importance of seeing humans as part of the natural world (eco-social approaches). Awareness of newer post-anthropocentric and posthuman philosophies was less evident.

### **Keywords**

COVID-19, eco-social, ethics, global crises, social work, values

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic stimulated reflection on global inequities, human relationships and responsibilities, and the value of community solidarity. Initially framed as a health crisis, economic and social ramifications soon became clear, as countries and communities grappled with balancing life-saving measures while maintaining economies and social support systems. Many aspects of this experience were not new – numerous regions of the world have experienced, or are experiencing, other health crises (such as Ebola or HIV) and disruptions caused by war and natural disasters. However, the global reach of COVID-19, including the search for vaccines, highlighted people's inter-connectedness and the linkages between everyday human lives, biological systems and international politics and economics. Citizens, professionals and politicians faced decisions that tested their values about what mattered, what was right and whose interests, needs and lives counted. The experience of living and working through the pandemic made these issues and choices more universally visible, as existing inequities were exacerbated and people were compelled to reconsider their priorities.

This article explores social workers' reflections on the impact of COVID-19 on their practice, particularly how they reconsidered their professional values and ethical actions, drawing lessons for future routine and crisis-responsive work. It draws on international webinars facilitated by the Social Work Ethics Research Group (SWERG) and the Ethics Commission of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) during April to May 2022. The webinars followed an international qualitative survey of over 600 social workers in 2020 on ethical challenges during COVID-19 (Banks et al., 2020). The webinars were designed to inform the People's Global Summit, held online during 29 June to 2 July 2022. Jointly organised by IFSW and the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) with partners, the summit focused on 'Co-building a new eco-social world: leaving no one behind' (<https://newecosocialworld.com/>).

Stimulated by the experience of working through the pandemic, the summit was inspired by the realisation that global crises of climate change, inequities in health and life chances, and political instability lent an urgency for different disciplines, organisations and movements to collaborate for 'an eco-social world'. This refers to a world in which human social networks are recognised as inextricably intertwined in ecological systems of co-dependent flora, fauna, geology and climate. Ideas for the summit built on intelligence gathered by IFSW of growing global inequities, and UNRISD's (2020) research highlighting the need for a new 21st-century 'eco-social contract'. 'Social contract' is a concept in political philosophy that refers to an agreement between governments and citizens covering mutual rights and responsibilities for social protection and maintaining social order. The social contract that emerged after the Second World War is premised on economic growth, enabling enhanced well-being of workers and their families through systems of state welfare in many countries of the global North and to some extent the global South (Shafik, 2022). Yet, many people remain marginalised, such as women and migrants, and there is a failure

to account for the ecologically damaging effects of economic growth, which affects different regions of the world unequally.

## Social work, the pandemic and the climate crisis

The deep and wide-ranging impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social workers and the people with whom they work has been well-documented and researched, including studies of practitioner stress, innovative practice, impact on vulnerable groups, exacerbation of existing inequities and the acceleration of digital working (for overviews, see Cheung, 2022; Sullivan-Tibbs, 2022). The experience of a global existential crisis, with the accompanying relaxation of bureaucracy, rethinking of priorities and questioning of what matters and what is right, not only led to calls to 'build back better', but also for a radical re-evaluation of how social work might play a role in creating and maintaining a more sustainable world. As Powers et al. (2021) suggest, mainstream social work is deeply embedded in a worldview premised on economic growth as contributing to human well-being. This forms the basis of the social contract mentioned earlier and entails exploitation of natural resources and creation of carbon emissions.

While there is a small and growing movement that has developed ideas and practices around green and environmental social work (see Dominelli, 2018; Matthies and Närhi, 2019), often this focuses on improving the natural environment for human benefit, as opposed to adopting more deeply ecological perspectives, de-centring humans as simply part of the web of life and embracing a post-anthropocentric worldview (see Bozalek and Pease, 2021). As the effects of the climate crisis become more apparent, more literature on eco-social work is emerging, alongside calls for a paradigm shift. However, as Mason et al. (2022: 1) point out, this often comprises calls for action rather than detailed recommendations for, or examples of, concrete practices. Hence, our aim was to convene conversations among social workers around the world to assess their understandings and practices against the backdrop of their experiences of, and responses to, COVID-19.

## Methods

SWERG and IFSW Ethics Commission planned six 1.5-hour webinars, advertised through IFSW and its members' national social work networks. Zoom-hosted webinars were offered to create a dialogical space for social workers to explore experiences and reflections, learning from each other and contributing to the People's Summit agenda. The webinars were designed both as a professional development/learning opportunity for participants, and for SWERG and IFSW to collect views to inform the summit preparations. While online groups have limitations, including challenges of poor connectivity and limited body language communication, participants were used to this medium, and facilitators strove to maximise inclusivity, including encouraging use of the 'chat' function. Self-selected participants included social workers, educators, students, representatives from national social work associations and non-governmental organisations. SWERG and IFSW drafted questions to frame small group discussions in the webinars as follows:

*Question 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?

*Question 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?

*Question 3.* What examples do you have of social workers achieving social and environmental transformation?

*Question 4.* Is there anything else anyone would like to add?

Durham University (the United Kingdom) granted ethical approval, and participants consented to the recording of the webinars and use of anonymised responses in research and publications. Webinars were facilitated by SWERG and IFSW members, with plenary introductory and concluding sessions and breakout groups. Four English-speaking webinars were facilitated for the IFSW regions: Europe (29th March 2022), North America (13th April), Africa (29th April) and Asia Pacific Region (2nd May), with two additional webinars in Arabic (28th March) and Farsi (22nd April). Despite repeated attempts, we were unable to hold a Spanish-speaking webinar for the Latin America and Caribbean region. The webinars in Arabic and Farsi were offered by IFSW colleagues who were particularly keen to enable participation in 'Middle Eastern' countries. The facilitators in these groups translated the recorded proceedings into English. Since our aim was to undertake a modest, exploratory study, with limited time and funds, we did not offer webinars in any other languages. In total, 285 people registered, with attendance ranging from 8 to 36 people in each webinar. All registrants did not attend, but the exact numbers of attendees were not recorded by all the Zoom hosts.

Written notes were made and chat text extracted for collation alongside cleaned Zoom transcriptions – corrected by the research assistant (Cairns) through listening to the original audio-recordings. These were analysed by the research assistant and principal investigator (Banks), who drew out themes linked to the focus of the study. We used a generic thematic analysis approach (Braun et al., 2022), following the structure of the questions asked in the webinars and looking for significant nuances of experiences and views, as this fitted the exploratory aims of the webinars. The following three overarching themes were identified:

1. Ethical challenges during the pandemic caused a rethinking of ethics in social work practice in relation to: (a) self-care, (b) digital working, and (c) less bureaucracy, more discretion and creativity.
2. Importance of a holistic approach in relation to: (a) people and planet and (b) working with communities.
3. Social work's contribution to social and environmental transformation in relation to: (a) social workers as skilled experts in social protection and sustainable development and (b) extending the concept of justice (from social to ecological).

These themes were checked and elaborated upon by other SWERG members in preparation for a keynote presentation and live panel at the People's Global Summit on 1st July 2022. The findings were written up in a report for IFSW (Banks and Cairns, 2022), which this article draws on and develops.

## *Rethinking the ethics of self-care, digital working and bureaucracy*

The first set of open-ended questions asked participants to reflect on how practising during the pandemic prompted rethinking of professional values and ethics. This generated much discussion, with participants keen to share experiences of working during the early stages of COVID-19, which were often traumatic, confusing and exhausting. Participants described drawing on social work ethics and values as guiding principles for navigating COVID restrictions and adapting practice accordingly.

Three of the seven key issues identified in the 2020 survey continued to trouble participants, as discussed below. It is important to note that while in most countries social workers operated under fewer COVID-related restrictions in 2022 than 2020 and had adapted to new ways of working, participants' responses illustrate that COVID-19 was still an enduring feature of work and life.

### *Self-care*

*The webinars:* Webinar participants were acutely aware of tensions between self-care (looking after themselves and their families) and responsibilities to provide care to service users. Social workers faced increased risks and stresses, including disrupted services, community contagion, not being recognised as key workers, lack of protective equipment and little consistent managerial guidance. Self-care was especially dominant in the North American webinar, as this social worker illustrates, 'How do we advocate for our own safety, but at the same time we want to provide these services that are incredibly important for people, so we did a little bit of both'. According to another US participant, 'this had been an issue for a while, but the pandemic just exacerbated it'.

Some participants reported staffing shortages due to COVID-19. Others reported added workloads when colleagues left unhealthy workplaces. A US social worker described deciding to leave: 'Am I going to continue to just help a system perpetuate rules that really aren't looking out for the benefits of the patients or the providers? And so I left after 16 years, with good retirement'.

Self-care was raised in other regions, as illustrated in the Farsi-speaking webinar report: 'Self-care was the most repeated issue for social workers . . . Particularly, at the first months of the pandemic it was so challenging that a number of social workers were infected and some even passed away'. An Iranian social worker described cases of suicide among social workers, while a Spanish participant recounted how management withheld information about levels of infection among colleagues.

Webinar discussions suggested that distress and dilemmas arising from the self-care conundrum were allayed when supportive networks of workers helped create reasonable norms for balancing competing needs. The opportunity for peer or supervisory discussion of risks and choices helped workers think through situations and decide when to push to support service users, and when to protect themselves and their families, conserve energy and acknowledge their limits. Examples from Kenya, Spain, Portugal, Iran, and Greece showed social workers supporting each other, advocating collectively, and instituting regular peer meetings to address problems. A Canadian social worker described, 'people banding together, organizing and fighting for the common good'. This was echoed by a Kenyan social worker's comments, 'despite facing all the challenges . . . we were able to maintain our unique culture of togetherness and supporting each other'.

*Discussion:* The prevalence of these dilemmas in the United States led the National Association of Social Workers to amend its Code of Ethics to cite self-care as 'paramount for competent and ethical social work practice' (National Association of Social Workers (NASW), 2021). The Code also

obligates social work organisations and educational institutions to promote measures that foster self-care, highlighting the role of employers in providing adequate and supportive working conditions. Inadequate wages and resources move the ethical burden to individual social workers and away from organisations and social safety nets. Compounding the self-care dilemma is burgeoning caseloads, increased needs and fractured service systems. Organisations creating ‘wobble rooms’ for workers in acute emotional distress signals the need for systemic change (Gurney et al., 2020), while the ‘quiet quitting’ (Rosalsky and Selyukh, 2022) of those exiting the profession has reverberating and enduring consequences.

### *Digital working*

*The webinars:* Digital communication increased rapidly during the pandemic, as restrictions on in-person contact meant this was often the only way of working. Webinar participants realised its potential for both social inclusion and exclusion, and the care needed in deciding when and how to use digital communication once restrictions eased.

Participants expressed concerns that certain people have fewer digital skills or lack access to technology. A Finnish social worker commented, ‘There are lots of users that did not have the access to digital media, especially elderly people, so that you could not meet them’. Confidentiality and privacy were also compromised, particularly in cases of child and domestic abuse, as conversations might be overheard by other household members and digital security was not guaranteed. An Iranian participant reflected that ‘In cyberspace it is not easy to stick to the principles [of social work] and I can say that, during the pandemic, sometimes the social work principles were disrespected unintentionally’. Social workers were also concerned about establishing trusting relationships online and making accurate assessments.

Nevertheless, participants recognised positive features of digital working. It enabled contact during suspension of in-person visits, and stimulated creative and more frequent exchanges, particularly with young people. North American participants suggested that cyberspace enabled people to connect with their families worldwide:

At least they can talk to them and see them and they can do that every day with the doctors . . . Before the pandemic we couldn’t do it because there was a strict law . . . The pandemic made us all rethink the way we do things.

A UK participant commented,

Many employers and groups of social workers really put much more explicit attention to connections, to forums for support . . . The move to digital is certainly providing different ways of networking and I think it has been very important . . . That kind of discourse has become more open and in a helpful way.

According to an Indian social worker, ‘we were able to reach out not just to the people within our district or our state, but also the whole of India as well and . . . other countries. So, this gave us our global connectivity’. In that sense, the pandemic forced workers to improve their digital competence and reinvent social work practice.

*Discussion:* Recent studies discuss the inevitability of digitally mediated social work, and the importance of being proactive in considering the ethical implications for privacy, intimacy, confidentiality and accountability (Fiorentino et al., 2023; Pink et al., 2021; Reamer, 2017). The pandemic accelerated debates about the consequences of incorporating digital technology into social work.

Consideration needs to be given to improving social workers' digital competence and widening citizens' access to virtual platforms to avoid creating a digital divide or increasing social inequalities. Social work can be developed as a hybrid system of communication with users (in-person and digital), but its main values of promoting social justice and inclusion should guide these developments.

### *Bureaucracy and discretion*

*The webinars:* Although not dominant, the issue of bureaucratic control versus professional discretion was raised in several webinars. During the early phase of the pandemic, in many countries social workers faced a vacuum of procedures and guidance. They had to find new solutions, using professional discretion to decide what was ethically right or practically safe. At the same time, governments and employing organisations introduced new blanket legal regulations and guidance, restricting movements of citizens and professionals, while allowing relaxation of certain statutory social work functions. Participants reported challenging or ignoring some newly introduced restrictions, using their judgement to work out what was right in unusual circumstances.

A North American participant commented that social workers identified ways services could best be offered, but were not standard practice yet, due to health information security restrictions:

You can't use any virtual programme, unless it met all of these 'HIPAA PIPA' [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act and Personal Information Protection Act] – like 1000 acronyms. And meanwhile, your client, like had a cell phone, and they could call you, maybe they could Facetime. And that wouldn't have been acceptable before. So there was bending of rules in that way.

Where bureaucratic framing was too rigid and ineffective, some participants developed new ways of working closely with communities and prioritising people's needs, going beyond regulations or inventing new protocols. A UK participant commented, 'when people who were homeless were provided with emergency accommodation . . . the mobilisation that took place was absolutely incredible . . . really putting health and well-being as paramount . . .'.

Services unavailable pre-pandemic were created to meet needs. Participants from Kenya and Malawi described how social workers were swiftly trained to offer adequate material and psychological support. Furthermore, social workers provided exceptional assistance (such as food and money) quickly, outside the regular procedures. As a French social worker commented, these were 'time-optimised' practices.

A Danish participant gave the example of social workers working with people who were unemployed being less controlling than usual:

. . . in many ways, social workers working with the unemployed felt that they had a better connection, better relation to the citizens because they did not have to control if they had applied for three jobs, they did not have to meet up every week to document that they are still job seekers. So in many ways, it has been a discussion after the pandemic, can we stay with that regulation? Because . . . it's easier to do the social work, it's easier to handle ethically and not spend that much energy on the control part of social work.

*Discussion:* The question posed by the Danish participant highlights how the pandemic stimulated a questioning of bureaucracy, making it possible to examine requirements and norms critically, relative to circumstances. It also helped social workers rediscover not only the use of professional

judgement and discretion (Manthorpe et al., 2021), but also their roles in implementing and contributing to policies that might be nearer to commonly accepted social justice values. Looking to the future, this raises a challenge to social workers to consider how less complicated bureaucratic procedures can become the 'new normality', and how far solutions found in individual cases, more focused on people's needs, can be upscaled and implemented systemically as social policy. It highlights the possibility for social workers to strengthen their capacity to practise politically, in line with social justice values.

### *Taking a holistic perspective: Rethinking the relational ethics of people, community and planet*

The next set of questions invited participants to discuss values, policies and practices related to future social and environmental conditions. The ensuing discussions focused more on social (rather than environmental) conditions. However, while most participants did not reveal a readily expressible conceptual framework or set of values that might be described as 'eco-social', some identified the need for more holistic philosophies (seeing people and planet as inter-linked) and practices (working with communities rather than just individuals).

#### *Holism: People and planet*

*The webinars:* Two ways of looking at people and planet holistically emerged: seeing people as whole beings and seeing people as part of the ecosystem.

Regarding seeing people as whole beings, some participants commented that initially COVID-19 was regarded as a health care or medical emergency, with social implications (such as isolation or unemployment) ignored or not prioritised. According to a Nigerian social worker,

Even those who were treated for Covid, they still couldn't get the psycho-social support to give them a wholeness of wellness . . . and we were pained as social workers . . . we need social workers to give the completeness that is required.

This goes beyond simply emphasising the social side of people's lives, it expresses this at an existential level in terms of wholeness and completeness. Prolonged neglect of people's overall well-being became a pressing issue shared between social workers in various places. A North American participant commented that social workers should speak out: ' . . . we can't just not pay attention to how this is mentally, emotionally, economically, socially, impacting all of us'.

This social worker was not only highlighting the impact of COVID-19 on all aspects of people's lives, but also the effects on 'all of us' together. This idea of human inter-connectedness was most clearly expressed in the African webinar, with recurring discussion of 'ubuntu'. Ubuntu is a traditional African philosophy that sees humans as interdependent ('I am because we are'), and espouses values such as mutual support, warmth and generosity (Mugumbate and Chereni, 2020). As this Nigerian social worker commented,

. . . there should be love, there should be compassion, there should be empathy for each human being, because each life matters . . . for us to exist as human beings in this world, we need to protect one another, we need to show love to one another, we need to be caring, and those are the values of the social worker.

The meaning and practice of ubuntu often seem to focus on inter-connectedness of people ('ubuntu' can be translated as 'humanity'). However, when located in a broader African worldview, humans are already understood as part of an environmental and spiritual world, in ways that are



less common in the global North. Nevertheless, in the European webinar, although not referring to ubuntu as such, a Spanish social worker commented, 'I want to see social workers seeing, thinking more systematically – we are part of the environment'. This theme also arose in the North American webinar, with a Canadian social worker articulating the importance of Indigenous worldviews, which are undervalued in current North American social work. In the same webinar, an academic criticised western, dualistic values (e.g. separation of mind/body, humans/environment).

*Discussion:* These comments resonate with ecologically oriented approaches to social work, which acknowledge humanity as an interdependent part of the natural world (Boetto, 2019; Gray and Coates, 2015). They encompass, but go beyond, some understandings of 'environmental social work', although the terms 'ecological' and 'environmental' are often used interchangeably. Environmental social work (Krings et al., 2020; Ramsay and Boddy, 2017) often takes a community-based approach, engaging with issues such as food security or food justice, climate change, human/non-human relationships, allocation of natural resources and promotion of sustainable development. Indeed, 'environmental sustainability' is recognised by IFSW as one of the top four priorities for social workers internationally (Jones and Truell, 2012). However, the issue of how to shift social work from its traditional focus on humans and 'the social' to a more ecological worldview and practice is an on-going challenge in a world, and local contexts, where immediate social problems are increasing.

#### *Taking a local holistic perspective: Working with communities*

*The webinars:* A strong theme across all webinars was how the pandemic re-positioned the intersections between social workers and communities of place, interest and identity. Restrictions on everyday practice led some social workers to draw on their deep knowledge of local networks to mobilise community-based responses to the pandemic. For example, practitioners in Afghanistan developed a Child Protection Action Network through WhatsApp in response to concerns about child welfare. According to an Afghan social worker, it started from a small group in one district, growing 'step by step, from community up to the agencies' into an established collaborative network in all provinces. Other examples include Malawian social workers' involvement in remote and frontline psychological first-aid responses, and Nepalese social workers' use of FM radios to reach communities facing inhospitable terrain and government restrictions. In Nigeria, social workers zoned community spaces to provide food stalls.

The crisis of the pandemic challenged those social workers and social work organisations that were used to working with communities in hierarchical, 'top-down' relationships based on organisational and professional power. They found themselves developing what Hardcastle et al. (2014: 106) call 'horizontal' relationships with people in local neighbourhoods and communities of interest to co-create support systems. As a UK participant commented,

We really need to learn from what actually happened with social workers being more connected with communities and not being so much within the offices and the institutions . . . British social work is not really out there with communities and, generally, it's quite institutionalised.

In some contexts, particularly in the global South where social work is more embedded in horizontal relationships with communities, participants discussed how lack of professional recognition generated significant hazards for practitioners, including being accused of breaching restrictions, lack of protective equipment and loss of colleagues due to working in contagious conditions.

*Discussion:* It is important to recognise the positions of power and privilege social workers occupy and how complicit social work itself can be in the oppression experienced by the most marginalised

people in communities. As a Canadian social work academic commented, social workers pay lip service to critical practice, but ‘neoliberal capitalism does not want social workers practising from a critical point of view; they want passive, docile social workers.’ The challenge beyond the pandemic is to consider social work’s role not only in supporting community-based networks of care, but also engaging in communities of action to bridge the ‘eco’ and ‘social’ aspects of life.

### *Re-envisioning the role of social workers: Social protection, sustainability and eco-social justice*

The third area of inquiry in the webinars sought examples of social workers achieving social and environmental transformation. In this section, we consider some of the views expressed about the role of social workers, which was the focus of much discussion in relation to working during the pandemic, although there was less discussion about their role in environmental transformation. We then explore social justice as a key underpinning value, motivating social workers to action and how it might be re-invigorated and extended.

#### *Recognition of social workers as skilled experts in social protection and sustainable development*

*The webinars:* Participants frequently noted the lack of recognition social workers received during the pandemic as essential employees. However, some felt that as time progressed and the social impact of the COVID-19 crisis emerged, social workers’ leadership roles in social protection and safeguarding were increasingly valued. Examples were given of how social worker activity positively raised the professional profile of social work. A Zambian participant commented, ‘During the COVID pandemic social workers were able to stand out and were able to be counted . . . that was one of the influences . . .’. He was referring to the enactment of legislation recognising social work as a profession in Zambia (Social Workers’ Association of Zambia Act, 2022).

With a focus on social workers’ proactive role in the social protection of vulnerable adults and children at risk of sliding further into poverty, solution-focused social work interventions were adapted to address homelessness and food shortages. An African social worker referred to ‘rampant’ food poverty, commenting that either people would die of hunger, or from contracting COVID-19. Social workers raised funds to buy and distribute food so people did not ‘die of hunger in this experience’. A Canadian social worker outlined practical steps social workers took to keep a shelter for homeless people open throughout the pandemic, leading to ‘hopefully . . . a positive perception of social work that can be sustained in terms of how we represent ourselves’. In the Asia Pacific webinar, a participant discussed the role of social workers in organising and distributing public health resources as a means of social protection, along with monitoring violations of human rights.

Some participants clearly saw a role for social workers in social and environmental transformation, while acknowledging the challenges. As a social worker from New Zealand commented,

There are the environmental . . . sustainability issues. All of those things are huge; it’s very complex and significant. But I guess that rather than being overwhelmed by the complexity of it, is also acknowledging that we as a profession have the foundations through our values and through our ethics to provide leadership across other professions as well.

*Discussion:* IFSW (2016) emphasises social workers’ role in enhancing social protection systems, which develop and evolve as new risks emerge. The Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) (2021) suggests that the impact of COVID-19 could see the number of people

across the world living in extreme poverty rising to over 100 million. On a more positive note, Lind et al. (2021) suggest the pandemic created opportunities to integrate humanitarian assistance more substantially in social protection systems. Social workers have a critically important influence in implementing such a development. The education of new generations of social workers in innovative approaches to social protection and sustainability is important to inform future practice.

#### *Re-energizing and extending the value of social justice*

*The webinars:* As outlined earlier, participants discussed how the pandemic highlighted and exacerbated existing inequities as people struggled with loss of social support, usual services and reduced incomes. Social workers had a key role in both supporting people on the margins, and advocating for groups and individuals whose rights, needs and interests were being ignored or damaged (e.g. people living in residential care or facing domestic violence). This emphasises social justice as a core value, concerned with promoting a fair distribution of resources, power and privileges between people in society.

For several participants, the pandemic also caused reflection on the complex nuances of social justice and the challenges of putting it into practice. An Australian academic remarked, ‘I would like to see more emphasis on social justice, the transformative potential of social work . . .’.

A North American participant stressed the importance of ‘cultural justice’, referring to ‘Indigenous people, and the particular impacts on them of the pandemic’. Although not named in the webinars, the idea of contributory justice is present in another remark in the report of the Farsi-speaking webinar: ‘Policies are always written in a patriarchal and top-down way, while a bottom-up approach may result in more effective outcomes’.

*Discussion:* The call to emphasise transformative social justice is challenging for an occupation that in many parts of the world is deeply embedded in state systems of social welfare, designed to maintain and ameliorate rather than unsettle existing structures of power and wealth. Yet awareness by the social work profession and social workers themselves of their positionality and complicity in the maintenance of existing social structures is an important first step. The specific reference made in one of the webinars to cultural justice is also significant. While we might assume that *cultural justice* is embedded in social justice, it is important to name it as being about respecting and valuing the norms, practices and power of peoples, cultures, traditions and nations that traditionally have been diminished and marginalised, and tackling historic and current inequities (Rankin, 2018). This is distinct from, but related to, ‘*contributory justice*’ (Miller Tate, 2019) which emphasises not just respect for diverse norms, but the importance of marginalised people having their knowledge and resources recognised, and contributing to collective understandings of their experiences. This concept includes the more specific notion of ‘epistemic justice’ (Fricker, 2007), which entails valuing and giving space to diverse forms of knowledge.

While cultural and contributory justice may be regarded as contained within the current concept and value of social justice, this is less true of ‘ecological justice’ (for a discussion, see Besthorn et al., 2016; Wienhues, 2020). Again, while ecological justice was not directly referenced by webinar participants, it was implied in comments about the inter-relationships between people and planet, and the need for holistic approaches to social work. However, ecological justice goes beyond environmental justice, in giving equal rights to non-human beings such as animals, and to other entities such as plants, the sky and oceans (e.g. to an adequate habitat, to non-pollution). It relies on a more holistic conception of rights, as espoused in the People’s Charter emerging from the Summit:

Holistic Rights recognize individual human rights, (dignity and fundamental freedoms), social human rights, (civil, economic, and political), cultural rights, eco-system rights, and the broader rights of nature. (People's Global Summit, 2022)

The report of the Farsi webinar noted that 'Social workers are now more thinking of green social work'. However, this topic was not explored, and it remains a challenge for social workers to consider how to promote both social and ecological justice, that is, eco-social justice, linked to more holistic conceptions of rights beyond those of humans.

## Overall discussion

The tone and content of the conversations in each webinar, and in breakout groups in the same webinar, varied greatly. Some themes recurred, while others were particular to one or a few groups. A noticeable feature of all discussions was the desire to share experiences of working during the pandemic, both the traumas and new ways of working. This is unsurprising, as in April/May 2022 COVID-19 was still present and in many countries precautions were in operation. It was hard to stand back and look 'beyond the pandemic'.

Participants were keen to discuss aspects of everyday practice that had changed (digital working and temporary removal of bureaucratic procedures), and issues that had been highlighted by the pandemic (self- and staff-care). The need for policy changes and the role of social workers in social and environmental transformation were more challenging to discuss. This probably reflects pressures linked to the *social* component of social work in addressing inter-personal relationships, family crises and income poverty – leaving little space to consider how social work can engage with environmental issues. It may also indicate a conceptual and practical split between 'the social' and 'the environmental'. In discussions about contexts where environmental destruction is visible and affecting on people's lives, bridges between social and environmental concerns were clearer and social work's role in addressing these issues was more tangible. For example, in the African webinar, there was significant connection to the eco-social theme, with calls to see social, health, economic and environmental issues as inter-related and to recognise the importance of holistic responses. This goes beyond the old debates of the medical versus the social model of health and well-being by extending the social to the eco-social.

While the webinars were limited in conversational depth, they highlighted a range of experiences and perspectives relevant to our core theme of co-building a new eco-social world beyond the pandemic. This enabled us to explore the issues raised further in relation to relevant literature. The challenge for social workers is that they are embedded in social welfare systems that are part of a global neo-liberal social and economic order, premised on inequitable distributions of wealth, resources and power between people and regions of the world, and extraction and exploitation of natural resources. This means that to contribute to change, social workers need to join political campaigns for a new world order, while also developing ground-level practices embodying care for people and planet, compassion, sustainability and fairness.

## Concluding comments

In a webinar presenting this research in February 2023, a UK participant described the current reality for social workers, struggling with high caseloads, asking how anything could be added to their work and 'are social workers the best custodians for our ecological future?' This is an important provocation, challenging us to think beyond where social work is now. The burden of working towards a more ecologically sustainable future is a shared one, and social workers, alongside other

professionals, citizens, politicians, governments, businesses and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have a role to play at both micro and macro levels. Social workers as professionals and citizens might promote eco-social justice as a core value through a range of actions such as supporting sustainable livelihoods and clean energy use; advocating for green social prescribing (e.g. nature-based activities for positive mental health); participating in climate protests; and lobbying for early bans on fossil fuel extraction. It is important that on-going critical reappraisal of social work values and practices begun during the pandemic continues in the context of the global impacts of the climate crisis, and that eco-social justice is placed firmly on the social work practice agenda, featuring more strongly in social work education, statements of professional values and principles and codes of ethics.

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