The making of a civil society politics in social work: Myth and misrepresentation with the Global Agenda

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Abstract
This article addresses ‘the making’ of the global agenda in social work by situating the process of agenda setting itself as an object of critical reflection. It discusses the way in which the agenda positions social work as part of a global civil society network somewhat removed from grassroots social work and raises concerns about its failure to address the causes of or possible solutions to social and economic inequality. The authors deploy recent empirical research relating to object-oriented politics, particularly the ‘no issue, no public’ debate on political mobilisation as a more viable alternative in contributing to structural change.

Keywords
Global Agenda, neoliberal capitalism, political mobilization, social work, socioeconomic Inequality

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The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development is the outcome of a collaborative initiative undertaken by three international organisations – the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) – representing social work practitioners, social work educators and social development NGOs, respectively. Our analysis of the tripartite Global Agenda and other supportive commentaries shows that it is inherently political in seeking to establish social work’s credentials in social development, despite there already being several key international bodies engaged in this work, one from within social work – the International Consortium on Social Development (ICSD). However, as we show, while inherently political in its intent, it is lacking of a ‘political agenda’ in content. Given that agenda setting is a process rather than an event, any analysis needs to examine how the agenda came about. It is likely that the agenda discussion began within the boardrooms of key international association executives and gained momentum at international conferences. The draft agenda written following the international social work conference in Hong Kong says its aim is to ‘claim/reclaim the priority of “political” action, develop a collective voice for social development, social work practitioners and social work educators’ but it does not say how, nor was there any mention of the term ‘politics’ or ‘political’ in the body of the draft agenda. Political is used twice in relation to ‘human right issues in relation to social, economic, cultural and political situations’ and ‘political instabilities, violence, dominations, and the erosion of peace building processes’ (emphasis added) under the category ‘respecting the dignity and worth of the person’ (IFSW/IASSW/ICSW, 2012, p. 3). That was the extent of social work’s political agenda in the draft document. It was not quite clear what type of document it was, whether guidelines for action, standards for engagement, or merely an expression of solidarity among the participating organisations and their members leading one to ask what other clues there might be to the
political intent of this agenda. The opening paragraph of the draft agenda talked about ‘speaking out clearly’ and ‘organising’ around relevant social issues that connect with the social work profession. As claimed by Jones and Truell (2012a), the agenda ‘is designed to strengthen the profile of social work and to enable social workers to make a stronger contribution to policy development’ (p. 454 emphasis added). As noted in the most recent Global Agenda (IFSW/IASSW/ICSW, 2012), ‘our commitments are guided by and consistent with our core statements on the definition of social work and the ethical principles of social work’ (p. 2 emphasis added).

Hence the Global Agenda appears to be a campaigning device for professional self-promotion and legitimation nested within a global civil society discourse. The word ‘campaign’ in this context might be seen to have political intent, in which regard the social work profession would join others’ campaigns that fit with its ‘cherished values’; the agenda-building endeavour was itself a campaign to enlist wide professional involvement; and the document spoke of ‘finding possible strategies for campaigning to influence international and regional agencies, national and local governments, social work community and stakeholders’ (the subject of Appendix 4). In effect, the intent here was to make others’ aware of and hand over the Global Agenda at several key events, including the United Nations’ conference in New York on International Social Work Day in March 2012. The intention was to have representatives from every country around the world present at this conference when the Global Agenda was handed over to the UN General Secretary and the presidents of various regional bodies present, such as the African and European unions, Mercosur and ASEAN.

Though a campaign for ‘action’, there was little concrete guidance in the draft agenda beyond raising awareness of the Global Agenda, though it was claimed, it was early days to speak of transforming ideas into action. Hence the draft agenda was mainly bent on
convincing others of the role ‘the social work profession should play in promoting a humane and just world’:

All over the world, social work practitioners, educators and policy and development workers are organizing conferences, discussion forums, and other platforms to enrich the first document, which was produced during the Hong Kong Conference. The three organisations, therefore, recognise the existence of overwhelming support for the process (IFSW/IASSW/ICSW, 2010, p. 1).

In March 2012, the draft gave way to a more developed Global Agenda and later in November 2012 the establishment of the Global Agenda Observatory (Zelenev, 2013). The Agenda document claimed that widespread feedback had moulded the final document via:

Consultation through member organisations and on the web … launched in 2008 leading up to the Hong Kong conference in 2010, attended by 3,000 participants. The outcome of the consultation and the conference was the first iteration of the agenda highlighting four key themes: social and economic inequalities within countries and between regions; dignity and worth of the person; environmental sustainability and the importance of human relationships (Guardian, 2012).

To date, little concrete evidence has been provided of the exact location, nature or extent of feedback, and the population involved beyond conference attendees. The Guardian report on 26 March 2012 by David Jones and Rory Truell, the immediate past president of the IFSW and secretary general, claimed in relation to International Social Work Day that:

In a co-ordinated series of events at UN offices in New York, Geneva, Nairobi, Santiago de Chile and Bangkok and at the Commonwealth headquarters in London, representatives of the three global professional bodies will celebrate the worldwide
contribution of social work and social development professionals to tackling the social challenges of individuals and communities. A new joint statement launched today, The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development: the Commitments will be received in New York, Geneva and London. The week has seen a coordinated programme of events in social work agencies, universities and voluntary organisations around the world. In the UK there have been events in Belfast, Perth, Cardiff and Stoke-on-Trent with a parliamentary reception in Westminster (Jones & Truell, 2012b).

IASSW President, Vimla Nadkarni (2013), called Social Work Day at the United Nations ‘a proud achievement’. It would seem then that those involved were directly connected to the three international bodies promoting the agenda ‘to raise the self-confidence, morale and influence of the social work profession around the world … [noting] the frustration of social workers and social development professionals all around the world that their work often went unrecognised and the profession lacked the respect of politicians’ (Guardian, 2012). Despite this flurry of activity, most social workers, in the South especially, are unlikely to have encountered any talk about this agenda beyond the international conferences attended where the Global Agenda has evolved into an organising device for conference themes.

As to the partners, the United Nations and other international agencies, critiques abound as to the consequences of their neoliberal structural adjustments programs on poor communities already suffering the worst impacts of ‘inequalities and unsustainable environments related to climate change, pollutants, war, natural disasters and violence’ (IFSW/IASSW/ICSW, 2012, p. 1). Yet no concrete strategy is provided as to how social workers would ‘strengthen the capacity of communities to interact with their governments to extend social and economic development’ (IFSW/IASSW/ICSW, 2012, p. 3). This is not what social workers ordinarily do employed as many are in urban-based public sector jobs.
within highly managerial neoliberal environments (Gray & Webb, 2013). And so questions abound: ‘We will promote social strategies that build cohesive societies and remove the seeds of conflict’ (IFSW/IASSW/ICSW, 2012, p. 3). What strategies, where and how?

In short, the claims made in the agenda as to just what social work is committing itself to accomplish seem far removed from the realities of the daily practice of social work. As Webb (2003) argued, against prospects of social work movements being structurally transformative on a global level, it is local cultural orders of reflexivity which embed the purpose and remit of its practices. He described the way social work practice is always encumbered by local context and experience. Any social work agenda needs to be grounded in concrete, tangible and realistic objectives wherein social work has a proven track record. And it needs to identify the activities in which social workers might engage to embed progressive social work theory and practice, activities which are inherently political (Gray & Webb, 2013).

So while well-intentioned, the Global Agenda’s reluctance to name capitalism as the root cause of social and economic equalities results in the absence of any concrete strategic solutions to widescale social and economic inequalities. After abandoning ‘class struggle essentialism’ for the plurality of antiracist, feminist and postmodern resistances in social work, ‘capitalism’ is now clearly re-emerging as the name of the problem and, as a consequence, we are witnessing today the return of a new radical agenda of political action. Any pronouncement on ‘promoting social and economic equalities’ has to grapple with their root cause, neoliberal economics sponsored by state capitalism. For this undertaking to take hold, fresh strategies are needed, based on new understandings of political obstacles and opportunities that configure the political objects of social work around issues and things rather than appeals to abstract and ‘cherished’ values and principles. Framing concrete forms of injustice and oppression, as a matter of concern for social work, places demands on social
workers, the state and the general public to respond to issues in a meaningful way. There is widespread agreement in social work that, at root, the issue it constantly has to address in daily practice is neoliberal capitalism and its partner new public management (Baines, 2006, 2008, 2010; Carey, 2007, 2009; Carey & Forster, 2011; Ferguson & Woodward, 2009; Gray & Webb, 2013; Harris, 2003; Marston & McDonald, 2012). The pernicious effects of this policy shift are seen daily in austerity measures, welfare rationing, punitive managerial regimes, growing inequalities, discriminatory labelling of welfare recipients, and so on, which are impacting negatively on social workers and service users alike. It is therefore important to ask what the relationship is between the Global Agenda and the issues impacting on daily social work practice. The fact that the Global Agenda does not name the underlying issue it seeks to address is thus deeply problematic.

The role of agenda setting as political strategy

Agenda setting is action. As a list or program of things to be done, or problems to be addressed, the setting of an agenda is both a result and a starting point that prompts the reader to question its creation, justification and consequences. Global public policy networks can bring new issues to the international agenda or ‘increase the prominence of issues that are already on the global agenda by articulating clear and focused goals, often justifying them on incontrovertible moral grounds’ (Witte, Reinicke, & Benner, 2000, p. 180). They can initiate public discourse on the issues at stake. A few individuals with the right leverage and powers of persuasion can create a common vision and convince important actors to throw their weight behind an issue. This certainly was the intention of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, the success of which might be analysed on two levels: First by examining how it expands and proliferates, i.e., the extent to which it is taken over by other social work actors and, secondly, by evaluating whether its objectives have been reached. To answer the first question, one needs to consider how the agenda was produced,
who wrote it and on behalf of whom, how was it solicited, framed, distributed, and transformed in response to feedback, and where exactly is it located in the international public sphere?

Writing an agenda takes collective effort and involves conflict and intense negotiation. Things are never cast in stone with agendas. Gradual bargaining is represented by an agenda. As writing devices, agendas are highly effective in integrating a large number of actors or variables into a positional framework, and they coordinate diverse perspectives, expectations and values. Hence agendas always rest implicitly on a framing exercise whereby opinion formation takes place as a result of a dynamic, circumstantially-bound process. Framing effects refers to attitudinal outcomes that are not due to differences in what is being communicated, but rather to variations in how issues are being presented (or framed) in public discourse (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2013). Thus we might ask, what do the authors of the Global Agenda have in mind when they state ‘we feel compelled to advocate for a new world order which makes a reality of respect for human rights and dignity and a different structure of human relationships’? What sort of ‘new world order’ is envisaged? The Global Agenda can be neatly located within liberal variants of transnational advocacy based on civil society politics. As we show below, as a system-stabilising strategy, it seeks to improve the quality of life of certain individuals but does not strive to change the existing social order. In fact, the Global Agenda represents a search for significant non-state actors that can secure global justifications and moral foundations for social work. However, we maintain that the rhetoric of the ‘progressive global agenda’ and its weak justifications fail to account for the complex contexts and disparate perspectives that characterise social work embedded as it is in context-specific practice. Universally, social workers occupy a context of ‘relative boundedness’ within nation-states, characterised by a lack of a coherent central driving force or mediator with the ability to reconcile potential conflicts and overcome resistance to implementation.
Critique of the globalisation discourse

As with the Global Standards for Social Work Education, the global agenda reflects optimism about the possibility of a universal response to social and economic inequalities which can span vast social, political, economic, geographical and cultural divides (Gray & Webb, 2008). Both ignore the enormous variability with which the core knowledge, processes, values and skills of social work are applied in the context of specific local realities. As stated above, it seems that social work has, at best, a minimal role to play on a global level and ‘local cultural orders of reflexivity are the ground from which to properly understand the purpose and remit of social work’s practices’ (Gray & Webb, 2008, p. 63) in protecting and regulating the aspects of clients’ lives which are its remit. In continually wanting to straddle the divide of the global and local godheads, having a foot on both sides, perennial problems of indigenisation, localisation or authentisation versus universalisation, globalisation and internationalisation persist (Gray, 2005).

The Global Agenda seeks to bring the parallel fields of social work and social development together in engaging and mobilising social work practitioners, researchers and educators to work with social policy practitioners and social development workers in the interests of global social change. The key word is ‘global’. What is being sought is a ‘global’ foundation for social work education, research and action; for clarifying future directions for the social work profession; for supporting campaigns to realise the social work profession’s cherished values; and for engaging the entire social work profession and those beyond it (First Draft, Hong Kong, 2010). Interestingly, the three international organisations involved in this program of strategic engagement are adopting an assimilationist strategy in bringing social development into the social work fold or, possibly more accurately, attempting to extend social work’s remit to social development. These international organisations – the IASSW, IFSW and ICSW – have joined together for the global international conference, the
next in Melbourne in 2014. The three organisations have had the last three regional conferences in Europe together in a consortium called ENSACT. In addition, in the Nordic sub-region, a joint conference of IASSW and IFSW was organised in 2011, with the next scheduled for 2015. IASSW, IFSW and ICSW are organised along similar lines, with representation in these five UN regions and all regard themselves as predominantly part of civil society.

Interestingly, the key international body for social development, the International Consortium for Social Development (ICSD)\(^2\) has maintained its independence and continues to hold separate international and regional conferences. It describes itself as an organisation of practitioners, scholars and students in the human services engaged in promoting social development around the world. It is a well-established international body, which publishes the journal *Social Development Issues* (through Lyceum publishers) with its 18th biennial symposium in Kampala, Uganda in July 2013.

**The positioning of social work in global civil society**

The content, tone and style of the Global Agenda is suggestive of civil society discourse based on the idea that ‘social work can do much to help the development of a civil society that integrates cultural diversity and personal identity’ (Lorenz, 1994, p. 6). This performative element is borne out with reference to the United Nations’ and World Health Organisation’s development policies. For instance, the agenda explicitly associates its development with the ‘wealth of social initiatives and social movements’ (IFSW/IASSW/ICSW, 2012, p. 1). Most striking of all is the demand for a ‘new world order’:

Consequently, we feel compelled to advocate for a new world order which makes a reality of respect for human rights and dignity and a different structure of human relationships.
We commit ourselves to supporting, influencing and enabling structures and systems that positively address the root causes of oppression and inequality. We commit ourselves wholeheartedly and urgently to work together, with people who use services and with others who share our objectives and aspirations, to create a more socially-just and fair world that we will be proud to leave to future generations (IFSW/IASSW/ICSW, 2012, p. 1).

The authors of the Global Agenda give no clue as to the nature of this ‘new world order’. Is it, for instance, communitarian or libertarian, atheistic or spiritual? The key contextual assumption that underpins the agenda is that we are witnessing, alongside economic globalisation, the construction of ever-increasing ‘unequal consequences for global, national and local communities … [which] have negative impacts on people’ (IFSW/IASSW/ICSW, 2012, p. 1). The agenda implicitly tries to emphasise a bounded, coherent sphere of agency for social work with a ‘non-governmental’ and non-market position. In other words, it tries to position social work in an independent and third sphere of civil society. This is most striking given the vast majority of social work takes place in governmental public agencies and an increasing number with a distinct market position.

The ESC Plenary Session of 15 October 1998 defined civil society broadly as ‘a collective term for all types of social action, by individuals or groups that do not emanate from the state and are not run by it’ (Smismans, 2002, p. 12) and civil society organisations as ‘the sum of all organisational structures whose members have objectives and responsibilities that are of general interest and who also act as mediators between the public authorities and citizens’ (Smismans, 2002, p. 12). In this respect, the Global Agenda statement on promoting social and economic equality is especially telling:

We commit to support, influence and promote global initiatives aimed at achieving social and economic equality. We will accomplish this by using and strengthening our
established relationships with the UN system and other international agencies. We will support the Millennium Development Goals. Our major focus is to prepare for the post-2015 development agenda, which includes, for example, the social protection floor initiative; decent work and international labour standards; the WHO initiative on the social determinants of health; and education for all. We will strive with others for a people-focused global economy that is regulated to protect and promote social justice, human rights and sustainable development (IFSW/ IASSW/ICSW, 2012, p. 2).

This status-by-association statement fails to acknowledge that the alignments articulated largely concentrate on developing countries when, for the most part, social work is taught and practised in the developed countries of the world. Moreover, implicit in this statement is an assumption that free market liberalism is compatible with the achievement of ‘developmental goals’.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were introduced in 2008 to monitor the implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration, along with the Social Protection Floor Initiative (SPF-I), launched in 2009 as a joint UN effort to build a global coalition of United Nations agencies, international NGOs, development banks, bilateral organisations and other development partners committed to collaborating at national, regional and global levels to support countries committed to building national social protection floors for their population. The first level of the social protection floor (SPF-I) comprises a basic set of social rights derived from human right treaties, including access to essential services (such as health, education, housing, water and sanitation, and others, as defined nationally) and social transfers, in cash or in kind, to guarantee income security, food security, adequate nutrition and access to essential services. Though the MDGs set out a vision for inclusive and sustainable globalisation based on human rights principles, they do not focus on economic,
trade and structural inequalities neither do they consider inequalities in wealth, property and power (Shah, 2001). Much is overlooked in the MDGs’ outcome-focused approach:

- Equality and redistribution matter for poverty reduction.
- Economic growth is important, but alone it does not necessarily reduce poverty and inequality.
- Social policy is an integral part of the development strategies of countries that have transformed their economies and reduced poverty relatively quickly.
- The linkages between policies and institutions in the social, economic and political spheres must be recognised if poverty is to be fought effectively.
- Politics matters for poverty reduction.
- There is no right way to reduce poverty (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), 2010).

The 2015 deadline for the MDGs is rapidly approaching as their successor, the Post-2015 Development Agenda, another UN-led process, works on a future global development framework. At a global level, three of the seven goals are ‘on-track’ (income poverty, gender and water) and three are ‘off-track’ but not too much so (nutrition, primary completion and child mortality) and one is far ‘off-track’ (maternal mortality) (Sumner, 2012, pp. 5–6). However, the top achievers of Benin, Mali, Ethiopia, Gambia, Malawi and Vietnam (Overseas Development Institute, 2012, p. 4) are not well represented by social work agencies and have a minor presence in the international social work associations. Clearly, MDGs are aimed primarily at underdeveloped countries with Western advanced industrial countries helping the former countries to make progress towards the MDGs. We can understand the rationale for NGOs in social development, such as the International Development Association, International Consortium for Social Development and the Association for Social Development having a keen interest in big-ticket development policy.
items like MDGs. However, we are puzzled about the relevance and lack of fit with social work and the Global Agenda statement. Indeed, it might be argued the more established social development organisations would be wary that the international social work associations are simply trying to jump onto the development bandwagon to extend their reach and visibility in the South.

**Some consequences of aligning social work to global civil society**

In casting social work as a component of global civil society, the Global Agenda seems out of step with practice given the majority of agencies employing social workers are constituted in the public sphere and in and through the nation state. It also buys into a strategically flawed process of civil society agenda formation where complex phenomena are reduced to discrete categories and subdivided into areas of collective life within separate spheres, such as family, public, market and private. It then endows these domains with their own distinct logics, to distinguish them from one another, before reassembling them into a whole involving hybrid or synergistic relationships (Chandhoke, 2002). The questions that immediately confront us in this connection are the following: do categories of collective existence *not* constitute each other? Equally, does not a single logic – that of power, underpin these categories and bind them together? To paraphrase Chandhoke (2002), a civil society politics which separates collective human existence into mutually exclusive spheres of thought and action *elides* the way in which each of these domains is constructed by apparatuses of power, which, spilling over arbitrary boundaries, underpin the whole. Such a power would be the capitalist State with its neoliberal economics.

We might ask what position social work occupies in relation to the state, market and civil society? On the surface, it seems that the Global Agenda is attempting to locate social work as a civil society movement. It is, however, precisely these insights that are at a discount when theorists suggest that civil society possesses a discrete and distinct *raison*
d’être which marks it out as different and autonomous from the state and the market. Civil society in contemporary political theory is often posed as an alternative to the state and market sectors, simply emerging as a third sphere of collective life (Chandhoke, 2002). In other words, the Global Agenda gives an impression of a global civil society that seems to be uncontaminated by either the power of nation states or that of markets. It is, therefore, naïve to believe that global civil society, comprising transnational non-government organisations, political activists, social movements, religious denominations, and associations of all stripe and hue can somehow neutralise existing networks of power by simply putting forth a different set of values. As Chandhoke (2002) points out, we should treat with a fair amount of caution the underlying assumptions that: (i) global civil society is autonomous of other institutions of international politics, (ii) it can provide us with an alternative to these institutions, or (iii) can even give us a deep-rooted and structural critique of the world order. Global civil society may well reproduce the power constellations of existing hegemonic institutions. To put it bluntly, should our normative expectations of civil society blind us to the nature of real civil societies whether national or global?

If the Global Agenda is a subtle attempt to position social work within civil society as we have suggested, this begs important questions about the role envisaged for the transnational network? Is the agenda a campaigning, public relations or lobbying device loosely attached to the UN in an attempt to build a transnational advocacy network? Could this emerging agenda be indicative of a shift away from framing the social work role as service provider to that of facilitator and supporter of broader civil society organisations? For instance, there is little evidence of any strategy of political activism in the Global Agenda. Many domestic groups covet international attention to issues of vital concern to them, often never breaking into the advocacy discourse constitutive of ‘global civil society’. What chance of success for social work when other transnational social problems have had to go through a
lengthy and complex process in gaining salience? Successful issues emerge not simply due to the dedication and persistence of altruistic entrepreneurs, but by the acquiescence of authorities in global civil society who, facing a menu of competing claims for their attention, engage in a process of vetting causes on the basis of interest-based concerns (Bob, 2005). It is not easy to find accommodation with the UN. Raphael Lemkin pitched the concept of ‘genocide’ to a number of governments and celebrities long before his idea found a home at the UN in 1948 (Carpenter, 2010).

The post-politics of the global social work agenda

The Global Agenda is characteristic of a deepening process of de-politicisation marked by the increasing evacuation of the proper political dimension from the public terrain as technocratic management and consensual policy-making sutures the spaces of democratic politics. It represents a politics of mobilisation around liberal values and ethical language rather than concrete issues affecting practitioners or service users. In other words, it presents social and economic inequality as a global humanitarian cause and thus produces a thoroughly depoliticised imaginary. The refusal to name the historical causes of social and economic inequalities as neoliberal capitalism and to openly advocate a non-capitalist solution implies the Global Agenda is supportive of liberal free market economics and mainstream consensus politics. This politics of consensus, which emerged on a global scale in the post-Cold War period and is based on the acceptance of the capitalist market and the liberal state as the organisational foundations of society, has been termed a ‘post-politics’ (Badiou, 2008; Žižek, 2008). Urbaniti (2003) defines post-democratic institutions of global governance as follows:

Governance entails an explicit reference to ‘mechanisms’ or ‘organized’ and ‘coordinated activities’ appropriate to the solution of some specific problems. Unlike government, governance refers to ‘policies’ rather than ‘politics’ … Its recipients are
not ‘the people’ as collective political subject, but ‘the population’ that can be affected by global issues such as the environment, migration, or the use of natural resources (p. 80).

This post-politics inevitably occasions the systematic foreclosure of the properly political moment – class struggle and popular resistance. Post-political narratives advocate an institutionalised series of ‘post-democratic’ expert techniques, whereby politics proper is reduced to social administration, rather than transformation. Based on normative preoccupations, it is effectively a system-stabilising strategy intending to resolve particular social problems with little or no claims to systemic change. The post-political condition is characterised by the rise of expert opinion makers, whereby expert adjudication comes to substitute proper political debate. Such a condition suggests the net effect of the Global Agenda may well mean little participation or impact in tackling the more structurally-entrenched causes and manifestations of poverty, such as the distribution of wealth and inequalities of income. Instead, it effectively depoliticises poverty by treating it as a technical problem that can be ‘solved’. We propose that the Global Agenda should be based on live issues relating to inequalities of wealth and status, confronting the increasingly ‘controlling societies’ (Deleuze, 1992) with its apparatus of police, privatised surveillance and military, while addressing key contemporary challenges, such as climate change, unemployment, capitalist degrowth and global market instability. We also believe it should make a clear statement about addressing issues of equality of condition and not just opportunity, such as the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor.

Further evidence of the vacuous post-political stance taken by the Global Agenda is indicative in the type of associations alluded to which are mainly mainstream consensus organisations. Absent in the agenda is the more radical perspective of left-wing progressive social movements and class-based politics. For instance, why doesn’t the Global Agenda
align itself with more radical statements on global inequality, such as the ‘de-growth’ and ‘steady state growth’ policy statements? Similarly, why is there no reference to the World Day of Social Justice, the Occupy Movement, Earth Day, One World Voice or World for All?

Towards an object-oriented politics in social work

In developing a more legitimate active politics, the Global Agenda can learn much from recent empirical research which demonstrates how a public is mobilised, how a controversy gains salience and why matters of concern around public issues emerge. It can draw immediately on contemporary social research showing that democratic politics in contemporary society involves particular practices of issue formation (Marres, 2005, 2007, 2012). This insight comes from an ‘object-oriented’ perspective on politics in Science and Technology Studies (STS) which gives pride of place to the ‘objects’ of politics, i.e., to defining and solving issues. Emulating Dewey’s (1991) ideals of participatory democracy and his ‘socio-ontological’ understanding of issues, it suggests that people’s involvement in politics is mediated by problems that affect them (Marres, 2007). It holds that public involvement in politics is dedicated to the articulation of public issues. Issues drive people to involve themselves in democratic processes not democratic values or democratic ideals of inclusive opinion-making and accountable decision-making (De Vries, 2007). Several points bear emphasis here:

- Relevant communities involved in decision-making are demarcated on the basis of issues rather than democratic values like ‘citizen representation’, ‘inclusive debate’ and ‘rational deliberation’. Contemporary research on social capital supports the need for more public involvement in politics, not less (Putnam, 2001), to counteract tendencies in contemporary post-politics to leave the big decisions to the experts because only they understand the complexity of the political structures and processes they have created and, anyway, you cannot fight
the system, as Jameson (2003) observed: ‘It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism’ (p. 73).

- ‘Theories of agenda setting regard issue definition as the decisive factor in democratic institutional politics, as it determines which actors can get involved in political process, and on what terms’ (Marries, 2007, p. 761).

- Public affairs are defined by the networked entanglement of social associations.

Hence we propose an object-oriented politics, one that concentrates on the materiality of issues and how they function to (re)produce certain forms of relations and, in this case, relations of social and economic inequality. This form of realism asserts that real things exist – these things are objects, not just amorphous ‘matter’, objects of all shapes from nuclear waste and poverty to birds’ nests (Morton, 2011). Such an approach to politics is not about discourse, the mode of analysis that has preoccupied social work for a decade or more. Some might object that things like roads, houses and power plants are cultural in character. This is true. However, they are not discourses. Rather, they are avenues of connectability around which discourses come to be woven, but without being reducible to these discourses.

Recently in Britain, when government minister Iain Duncan Smith carelessly claimed he could live on the standard weekly welfare benefit of £53 and defended his ‘bedroom tax’, people mobilised. They did not march through the streets. Rather, groups like Disabled People Against Cuts and UK Uncut protested outside his £2 million Tudor mansion in Buckinghamshire and served him an eviction notice in protest at the bedroom tax. In this instance, issue-based politics – the issue being class power, inequalities of property ownership and wealth – focused exclusively on the Minister’s house and garden. The protest group danced to reggae, frolicked on Duncan Smith’s lawn, enjoyed a walk around the extensive grounds of his house and brandished banners. This is an example of an instructive object-oriented demonstration against economic inequality and a rather creative one at that.
Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that a certain manoeuvre of position is occurring with the Global Agenda and the three international associations involving a rhetorical alignment with global civil society discourse. The implication of this is that it does not genuinely represent the nature and role of social work in contemporary society which, for the most part, is embedded within the highly managerial public sector apparatus with nation states. By implication this leaves the Global Agenda open to the well-rehearsed critiques of civil society as an autonomous third space uncontaminated by the state or market. Social work is not and can never be an autonomous third space, civil society entity and it is disingenuous to suggest that it is.

Secondly, we have asked what type of politics is it that refuses to name the capitalist apparatus causing the problem of socioeconomic inequality, or to propose solutions beyond professional solidarity. The Global Agenda needs to tie its ideological colours to its mast. As it stands, it is an example of post-politics, which is lacking political action and nothing more than the incremental social administration of problems which is left to expert knowledge brokers at the United Nations representing the interests of an amorphously defined constituency. We would wish to question whether the Global Agenda has representative validity. Nowhere is any substantive articulation provided about the exact processes beyond conferences and internet communication leading to its formulation, the numbers directly involved beyond international executives and conference attendees and the nature of their involvement. However, the establishment of the Global Agenda Observatory is a step in the right direction in relation to matters of transparency. It ‘will consist of networks or consortia composed of institutions of higher education and professional/practice-based organizations that jointly conduct research, analyze, synthesize and report on Agenda activities’ (Zelenev, 2013, p. 420).
Thirdly, who is the audience of this agenda? Is it written to convince the United Nations that social work should have a seat at the table, meaning certain leaders in professional associations or a chosen few members at large should represent the profession at international forums like World Social Work Day? Is it merely a networking manoeuvre seeking to keep pace with or get ahead of other international social development organisations in this space? Whatever its intentions, as noted in the first concluding point above, it seems the profession’s leaders are losing touch with what is going on at the grassroots, in the everyday working spaces the majority of social workers occupy.

Fourthly, we contend that object-oriented politics is a much better gauge of what counts for grassroots social work activists in terms of their direct political environment. People do not get angry about values but about concrete situations and issues that they see undermining these values, issues like violence against women, rape, paedophilia, gay rights, lack of housing, access to land, austerity welfare cuts and the privatisation of child care.

Fifthly, we ask why our international professional organisations are choosing to align with the United Nations rather than far left groups and social movements, like the Occupy Movement, which long-time social work activist Frances Fox Piven (2012) recently reminded us is far from over. We suspect that a liberal humanist free market rationality is the ideology shaping this agenda, which means the root cause of social and economic inequalities – the unjust capitalist system – will remain unchanged.

In short, any future development of the Global Agenda needs to name the problem we are seeking to solve to attain social and economic equality and social justice. It needs to name the complex mix of issues at stake and strike at the enemies (Gray & Webb, 2013). It also needs to prioritise the social and economic issues which are likely to differ from region to region. Sergei Zelenev, Executive Director of ICSW, has recently gone some way to adding substance to the issues around social and economic inequality with the tripartite Global
Agenda Observatory (2013). He has also reported on a road map of policy roll out for agenda priorities. However, an internationalising agenda with global ambitions cannot produce on-the-ground change for social workers and ordinary citizens or grassroots communities without a strategic approach. Campaigning, lobbying, advocating, voting and all such political activities aimed at effective political change that has a direct impact at the local level are complex activities backed by a wealth of resource-intensive research. We have proposed insights from science and technology studies around political mobilisation to demonstrate that without naming the problem, without naming the specific issue, there can be no public to galvanise it.

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**Notes**

1. http://wwwglobalsocialagenda.org/
2. http://www.socialdevelopment.net/

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