

16**International Social Work:
Challenges and Opportunities
in a Global Society****James Midgley**

The profession of social work has spread around the globe. It is no longer an American or Western European phenomenon. Although there are no reliable estimates of the total number of professionally qualified social workers in the world today, the International Federation of Social Workers reports that its eighty national member associations together represent about a half-million social workers. In 1997, Garber reported that the International Association of Schools of Social Work had about 1,700 member schools in more than one hundred countries.

Social workers have been engaged in international activities for many years, and these activities have been intensifying in recent years. In the United States, many more social workers have engaged in forms of professional practice that involve collaboration with colleagues in other countries. Many more American social workers now attend international meetings and conferences, and many take study tours to learn about social work abroad. More international content is now being included in the social work curricula of American schools of social work, and many schools have established collaborative partnerships with schools of social work in other countries. It is now common for American schools to have international agreements for collaborative research and training activities. Florida State University, for example, offers student field placements in South Africa under the supervision of University of KwaZulu Natal. Many social work educators from other countries come to the United States to study the country's social services and social work practice approaches, and many American social workers go abroad to learn about the problems they face and the services and approaches they use.

The term *international social work* is widely used today to refer to these and other activities. However, the term is not well defined, and different writers use it to mean different things. While this can be frustrating, most social workers understand the term to refer to social work practice with people in different countries or to the professional exchanges that take place among social workers in different countries. Originally, the term was used to refer to social work practice in international agencies such as the

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United Nations or the Red Cross, but today it describes all forms of social work practice involving international clients. Additionally, it reflects a growing awareness among social workers of the impact of international forces on professional practice everywhere. In its broadest sense, international social work includes everything from public social work services provided in the American Southwest to undocumented immigrants to private adoption services for American citizens adopting Romanian children, as well as services provided through international relief organizations to internally displaced people in Ethiopia.

This chapter provides an overview of the field that will be helpful to those of you who want to know more about international social work. It begins with an overview of the international linkages that have characterized social work's evolution, beginning when the profession was developed in the early twentieth century, and of the features of social work in different parts of the world today. Next, the chapter focuses on international social work practice, including opportunities for social workers to practice in other countries and in international social service and development agencies. However, special emphasis is given to the fact that all social workers in the United States now routinely encounter clients from other countries. In view of the increasing exposure of social workers to international realities, the chapter argues that international social work practice should be viewed not only as taking place abroad but as an integral part of everyday practice here in the United States. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the opportunities for and challenges of international social work today and by showing that a greater awareness and engagement with international realities can enrich the profession.

But first, the chapter provides a brief account of the historical development of the social work profession and an overview of the nature of social work practice in different countries. To understand international social work, one must be familiar with the way the profession evolved and appreciate how social workers in different parts of the world seek to foster social work's goals. Both will facilitate a better understanding of international social work.

HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK

Modern-day social work began to emerge in Europe and North America in the late nineteenth century. Although means of communication were not as well developed as they are today, the founders of social work in different countries communicated and shared experiences with each other. This resulted in the diffusion of new ideas to different parts of the world. One well-documented example of how an innovation in one country influenced social work's development in another country is the visit of Jane Addams

and her friend Ellen Gates Starr to Toynbee Hall in London. Toynbee Hall was the first settlement house in the world. Addams and Starr were impressed with the settlement house idea. After returning to Chicago, in 1889, they established the Hull House settlement (Kendall, 2000). The first school of social work established in South America—and, indeed, outside Europe and North America—was opened in Santiago, Chile, in 1925 as a result of a collaboration between René Sand, a Belgian physician and secretary of the International Red Cross, and Alejandro Del Rio, a physician and Chilean government official. With Sand's help, Del Rio studied developments in Europe and, on his return to Chile, persuaded the Chilean government to establish a professional training school. The school subsequently merged with the Catholic University in Santiago. Sand also helped recruit a Belgian colleague, Jenny Bernier, to be the school's first director (Kendall, 2000).

Western Influences and the Spread of Social Work

Developments in professional social work in the United States were also adopted by Europeans and spread to Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific and Australasia. In some cases, missionaries played a key role. For example, in India, the Reverend Clifford Manshardt, a missionary employed by the American Board of Missions in Western India, established the country's first settlement house in 1926. It was located in a shantytown community in Bombay called Nagpada. Rev. Manshardt subsequently met Sir Dorabji Tata, the wealthy Indian industrialist, and as a result of their collaboration, the world-renowned Tata Institute of the Social Sciences was created in 1936. The institute was the first professional social work school in India, and Rev. Manshardt became its first director (Kendall, 2000). It continues to be one of India's most prestigious schools of social work and an internationally recognized leader in social work education.

The British imperial government in London also encouraged the introduction of social service programs in its colonial territories (Midgley, 1981). Usually this involved creating programs for young criminal offenders. Social workers from Britain were often recruited to establish these programs, and in time, they were augmented to respond to other pressing social needs such as child neglect, begging, and destitution. In many cases, a separate department of social welfare was established. For example, in 1943 the position of secretary of social services in the office of the colonial governor in Ghana was created. This development resulted in the creation in 1946 of a full-fledged department of social welfare and housing, which subsequently became known as the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development. The department assumed responsibility for a vocational training center for people with disabilities, several youth clubs,

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a juvenile court, and the probation service. It later expanded into rural areas by providing literacy education for farmers, village community centers, and assistance with small-scale agriculture and community road construction. In 1950, the department created its own social work training school, and in 1956, it entered into an agreement with the University of Ghana to establish a university-level social work program (Blavo & Apt, 1997).

The First International Professional Associations

An important event in the history of international social work was the creation of the first international professional associations. Healy (2001) reports that these associations evolved out of a major international social work conference held in Paris in July 1928 with representatives from forty-two countries. By the time a second international conference was held in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1932, three additional countries, including the United States, had joined. However, progress was severely impeded by the Second World War, and it was only in 1950 that a plan for reorganizing the group was discussed. The result of these efforts was the creation of the International Federation of Social Workers, established in 1956. Today, the federation represents national professional social work associations from eighty countries.

In 1929, forty-six schools from ten countries came together to found the International Committee of Schools of Social Work. The committee subsequently became known as the International Association of Schools of Social Work (Kendall, 2000). Today, the association represents schools of social work in more than one hundred countries.

Developments After World War II

In the years following World War II, the rise of Communist governments in Eastern Europe, China, and elsewhere impeded the international expansion of social work. Generally, these governments did not approve of social work. Although social work had been established in several countries that subsequently came under Communist rule, the profession was not well developed in these countries, and in many cases, the few social work schools that had been established disappeared. For example, schools of social work in China, which were among the oldest in Asia, were closed down after the Communist government came to power. On the other hand, in Poland, where the country's first school of social work was founded in 1925, professionally educated social workers continued to find employment in the government's social and health services (Healy, 2001).

While Communist governments in some parts of the world hampered the profession's development, social work expanded rapidly in the newly independent developing countries of the Global South in the 1950s and 1960s. In some cases, the foundations for social work's development had been laid by the colonial governments that had introduced public social service programs and supported the creation of social work schools. In the 1950s, the United Nations, which actively supported the international spread of social work, augmented the colonial governments' contributions.

United Nations advisors who traveled to the developing countries to assist governments to expand their welfare programs frequently proposed that professional social work schools be established. For example, in the early 1950s, a United Nations team advised the Pakistani government that professional training programs in social work were urgently needed to meet the staffing needs of the country's social welfare services. As a result, Pakistan's first professional school of social work was established in Lahore in 1954 (Midgley, 1981).

Recent Trends

Despite the retrenchment of government social service programs in many parts of the world in the 1970s and 1980s, social work programs continued to expand, particularly in Western industrial countries. In developing countries, on the other hand, serious debt problems and the imposition of structural adjustment programs by international agencies such as the World Bank have severely curtailed opportunities for professional practice in the public social services. However, the continued flow of international aid to the developing world has resulted in the expansion of nonprofit community-based organizations, many of which employ social workers.

Social work has also expanded in the former Soviet Union, the former Communist countries in Eastern Europe, and China. The first social work educational program in the Soviet Union was established at the Moscow Academy of Pedagogical Sciences during the Gorbachev administration in the mid-1980s, and by the early 1990s, about thirty social work programs had been created in the country (Guzetta, 1995). Social work schools have also been established in Eastern European countries such as Albania, Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Romania. There were similar developments in China in the late 1980s, when the government began to permit universities to establish social work courses. A unique feature of the development of social work in China has been a close collaboration between schools of social work in China and in Hong Kong and a determination on the part of Chinese social work educators to develop a curriculum that is uniquely suited to the country's needs (Yuen-Tsang & Sabin, 2002).

**SOCIAL WORK ACROSS THE GLOBE:
COMMONALITIES AND DIVERSITY**

Although social workers have shared information and learned from each other for many years, it is only quite recently that detailed case studies describing social work practice in different parts of the world have become available (Hokenstad, Khinduka, & Midgley, 1992; Mayadas, Watts, & Elliott, 1997). However, these studies lack accurate statistical information about the number of social workers in different countries, and about their deployment in different fields of practice and agency settings. But they do show that social work around the world is characterized by similar as well as unique features and that, internationally, the profession exhibits both diversity and commonalities.

Because social work began in Europe and North America and then spread around the world, it is not surprising that social workers share common values, skills, and professional knowledge. Throughout the world, social work is characterized by its commitment to addressing social problems, meeting human needs, restoring social functioning, promoting social justice, and advocating progressive social change. Social workers are also identified by their involvement with particular fields of practice such as child welfare, mental health, medical social work, school social work, youth services, income maintenance and support programs, services to people with disabilities, probation and correctional social work, community organizing and development, and services to older adults. However, their involvement is largely problem focused, and they are primarily concerned with remediation. In most countries, social workers are responsible for addressing social problems such as child neglect and abuse (see box 16.1), mental illness, drug and alcohol dependence, family disintegration, juvenile delinquency, homelessness, and destitution.

**Box 16.1 An American Social Work Student's Experience in
International Social Work**

My interest in social work took me a long way from my suburban Los Angeles upbringing to working with abandoned children in Romania. While only a teenager myself, I witnessed a younger cousin's unfortunate involvement with the child welfare system. This experience made me acutely aware of the vulnerability of children and their need for protection. I resolved then to make the reform of the child welfare

system my life's work.

In college, I designed my own major in child development and public policy and developed a particular interest in orphanages and other forms of out-of-home care. From a description of emotional dwarfism in my freshman developmental psychology textbook, I learned about long-term institutionalization and its potentially severe consequences. I found it hard to accept that

Box 16.1 Continued

children could be so neglected, and I believed that I could help such children by providing my love and attention. That year, I established contact with Romanian Children's Relief, a non-governmental organization serving institutionalized children in Romania. Two years later, the opportunity to intern with this organization arose.

When I first entered an orphanage in Bucharest, some forty toddlers reacted to my presence by calling out, "Mama," and putting out their arms to be held or frantically clawing at me for attention. I felt utterly overwhelmed, fiercely protective and maternal, frightened of what their future held, amazed by their resilience, and moved by their attempts to reach out for love. When my internship ended, I pictured the faces of the children and made the decision to continue with Romanian Children's Relief after graduation. I prepared for the job by studying Romanian with a tutor and writing an honors thesis on Romania's child welfare system.

The original plan for my position with Romanian Children's Relief was that I would manage a new foster care support program in Bistrita, a small city in northern Transylvania. Ten days after I arrived, however, my role underwent a drastic change. The director of Romanian Children's Relief suddenly resigned. No one else in the organization was in a position to assume leadership, so I was asked to step into the job. It seemed impossible to say yes, given my complete lack of training for

the job, but impossible to say no, because the situation was so desperate. I plunged in. I worked eighteen-hour days for several months, struggling to learn how to manage a staff and three programs in a language I had begun to speak only six months earlier. In collaboration with an amazing staff and dedicated government and community partners, we created a support program for foster families that was recognized by the Romanian government as a model for replication and was the subject of a study by Case Western Reserve University. My proudest achievement of all was to hire and train staff members to succeed me so that I was able to leave the program in the hands of Romanian supervisors for the first time since the organization was founded ten years earlier.

Upon my return to the United States, I enrolled at the University of California, Berkeley, in the combined master's and PhD program in social welfare. My goal is to become a specialist in out-of-home care for children so that I can design programs, consult for nonprofit organizations and governments, and conduct research in this area. I envision a career in which I can support many national and international child welfare efforts through the sharing of knowledge.

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Another common feature of social work is the profession's link with public social services. Although social work was initially associated with the nonprofit sector, and particularly with charities and settlement houses, the profession's growth owed much to the new employment opportunities that were created when government social services expanded around the world during the twentieth century. As governments created new social

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service programs, the demand for professionally qualified social workers to staff these services increased. However, this situation is changing. In industrial countries, governments are increasingly contracting with non-profit and commercial providers, and thus reducing the number of professionally qualified social workers directly employed in the public sector. Budgetary difficulties and structural adjustment programs have resulted in a decline in the number of social workers in government service in many developing countries. Private practice has also become more common in some parts of the world. Nevertheless, governments continue to be a major employer of professional social workers in many countries. Even in the United States, where the number of social workers in the public services has fallen steadily, about a third of the members of the National Association of Social Workers are employed in the public sector (Leighninger & Midgley, 1997).

Although social work throughout the world shares common features, social work scholars and leaders in some countries often strongly advocate one practice approach or field of practice, which, they contend, should be given preference. As Hokenstad and Midgley (1997) note, social workers in India and South Africa have been encouraged to pay particular attention to economic development and to engage in forms of practice that promote development. In Latin America, emphasis has been placed on political activism, and social workers have been urged to mobilize poor people to campaign for social justice. In several African countries, social workers have been called on to help stem the AIDS pandemic, which has claimed so many lives and decimated so many families and communities.

In addition, social work in some countries has acquired unique features. For example, in European countries such as Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands, social pedagogy has emerged as a distinctive branch of social work practice. Although social pedagogy is similar to community social work practice, it has a strong educational component and seeks to use educational techniques to promote community involvement. However, it is not limited to community settings, and it is also applied in residential care and youth work (Midgley, 1997). Another example comes from India, where social workers have historically been involved in personnel management, or labor welfare, as it is known. In many African countries, social workers have long been involved in rural community development work, using traditional community organizing techniques to mobilize local people to build feeder roads and bridges; engage in agricultural projects; construct community centers, schools, and health clinics; and promote village industries (Midgley, 1997).

These innovations and diverse forms of social work practice reveal the extent to which the social work profession in different countries has adapt-

ed to different economic and cultural contexts as well as challenges. However, the social work profession in most countries is relatively small and does not have great prestige or much national influence. Accordingly, the fact that social work has sought to address pressing social problems around the world does not mean that these problems have been solved. Today, problems such as poverty, family disintegration, malnutrition, alcohol and drug abuse, inequality, AIDS, child abuse and neglect, homelessness, mental illness, and social injustice persist on a huge scale. Nevertheless, social workers have made a difference, and their contribution has been recognized. Social workers around the world are known for their commitment to addressing these problems, promoting people's well-being, and advocating social justice. Increasingly, efforts are being made to address these problems at the international level. In addition to more frequent exchanges among social workers from different countries, the emergence of social work as a global profession has been accompanied by greater collaboration and engagement with international issues by social workers everywhere (Midgley, 1990).

INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Historically, international social work has been viewed as a specialist field of practice undertaken by a small group of social workers with specialist skills (often including the ability to speak more than one language) or interests that equip them to work abroad. Some of the first publications about international social work defined the field in this way. When the first entry on the subject was published in the *Social Work Yearbook* in the United States in 1937, the author, George Warren, explained that international social work involved disaster relief, assistance to war victims and refugees, international public health measures, and involvement with international organizations such as the League of Nations and the International Labour Organization (Healy, 2001).

Walter Friedlander stressed this last aspect in his best-selling 1955 textbook, *Introduction to Social Welfare*, one of the first to contain a separate chapter on international social work. Friedlander noted that international social work was the youngest branch of the profession at the time, and that its goal was to promote the welfare of the world's people through the employment of social workers in international organizations such as the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the Red Cross, the YMCA and YWCA, and the International Child Welfare Union. At the time, many social workers still viewed international social work as a specialist field of practice that takes place in international agencies. The term has been broadened to describe a specialized field of practice involving social work-

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ers who practice abroad. However, many scholars who write about international social work today believe that this approach is too narrow. They point out that international social work practice does not only take place in international agencies, and that international social work should not be viewed only as taking place in other countries. They point out that today, many social workers in the United States encounter international realities in their daily practice. They routinely serve immigrants and refugees, and many deal with divorce and child custody cases involving a parent who comes from another country. These activities offer challenging opportunities for social workers in the United States to engage in international social work without actually living or working abroad. Clearly, international social work has become more complex than it once was. Accounts of the field must pay attention to the many different ways that social workers engage with international realities both here and abroad.

Social Work Practice and International Agencies

Social workers have long been involved with the major international social welfare agencies. They have found employment in international govern-



A social worker from Save the Children, a nongovernmental international agency that employs social workers, helps a young Rwandan refugee fill out paperwork.

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ment agencies such as the United Nations, including the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and UNICEF, and in nongovernmental agencies such as the Red Cross and Save the Children. In the early decades of the twentieth century, administrators of these international agencies and the founders of social work established close links. The Red Cross was one of the first international agencies to employ social workers.

Social workers also contributed to the creation of new international agencies such as Save the Children, which was established at the end of World War I by the British social worker Eglantyne Jebb (Healy, 2001). Today, the fund makes a major contribution to child welfare around the world. Like the Red Cross, the fund became a major employer of professionally qualified social workers.

Social workers were also actively involved in the League of Nations, the precursor to the United Nations. Although the League did not operate its own programs, it produced studies and reports that were used to publicize social problems such as drug abuse, prostitution, child labor, and the trafficking of women. The League also encouraged its member states to take steps to address these problems. Social workers played an important role as experts and advisers, and they helped draft these documents and disseminate the League's recommendations (Friedlander, 1955).

When the United Nations was established in 1945, social work had secured widespread international recognition, and, as noted earlier, the United Nations actively promoted the profession's international development during the 1950s and 1960s. The United Nations also employed social workers, particularly in its specialized agencies, such as the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency and UNICEF (Friedlander, 1975). The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency was established by the Allied powers in 1943 to provide emergency relief to the millions of people whose lives had been devastated by World War II. It became a major employer of social workers, who played a particularly important role in meeting the needs of refugees, orphans, and separated families (Friedlander, 1975).

Although these organizations hired social workers, the vast majority of their staff were not social workers. Over time, social work's influence within these organizations waned. In addition, the profession did not maintain the links that had been established with the administrators of these organizations. Any ambitions to staff these organizations with professionally qualified social workers gradually faded. By the 1980s, there was little evidence that social workers were playing a major role in these agencies. In addition, social workers were sometimes criticized for adhering to outdated practice approaches. For example, UNICEF became increasingly disenchanted with traditional child welfare casework practice and residential services, and

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social workers were seen as lacking involvement in prevention and developmental activities that could address the most pressing needs facing children in the developing world.

It appears that social workers have been more successful in finding employment in international nongovernmental agencies. Although accurate employment data are not available, social workers are reportedly employed in nongovernmental international organizations, where they work with poor communities, street children, women's groups, and people with disabilities in many parts of the world. Some use conventional casework approaches; others are engaged in a variety of developmental projects involving microenterprises, the development of community infrastructure, maternal and child health, and village crafts. Social workers employed in international agencies such as CARE, World Vision, Christian Aid, Save the Children, OXFAM, Caritas Internationalis, and Catholic Relief Services are deeply engaged in development work.

Social workers also practice in smaller international organizations involved in social service and development projects in the Global South. These include both secular and religious agencies. Many churches and missionary organizations manage programs of this kind. In addition to their traditional emphasis on establishing schools and hospitals, they are creating community development and social service projects. Often social work graduates with a spiritual vocation find employment in these agencies. Many secular organizations that provide services to needy children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and poor communities in other countries also provide opportunities for social workers to practice internationally.

Social Work Practice Abroad

In addition to working in well-established international social service and development organizations, social workers from the United States often find opportunities to work in other countries. While some are employed by American organizations that operate in these countries, others have found employment in local social welfare agencies. In either case, there is an expectation that these social workers will have a specialized knowledge of international affairs and the skills to work in other cultures.

Some American social workers are employed in other countries on a long-term basis, fulfilling their career aspirations to practice in international settings. Others do so for short periods of time. This is particularly true of newer graduates who wish to spend a year or two abroad. Often they have prior experience living and traveling abroad. It is not unusual for graduates who served as Peace Corps volunteers to want to return to the country in which they were placed or gain experience practicing in another country.

American social workers generally find it relatively easy to obtain employment abroad. Because of its high level of professionalization, organization, and standardization, social work in the United States is respected internationally. Since relatively few other countries provide social work education at the graduate level, American social workers who hold an MSW are particularly well regarded. Some social service agencies in other countries actively recruit American social workers. As a result of severe retrenchments in the social services and widespread disdain for the social work profession during the Thatcher years, Britain now has a severe shortage of professionally qualified social workers. Many British social services agencies are eager to employ American graduates. Several placement agencies in the United Kingdom have recruited social work graduates from American schools of social work. These agencies usually make the necessary arrangements for those who are hired.

Social workers who seek employment opportunities in other countries without the assistance of a placement agency are often challenged by such formalities as acquiring visas and other requirements for entry. This is particularly true in developing countries, where work permit and visa regulations can be quite restrictive. Although there is increasing interest in international economic and social development work among American social work graduates, few are able to make their own arrangements to work in development programs. Thus most are employed by organizations in the United States that operate such programs in the Global South.

Healy (2001) reports that efforts to persuade the U.S. government to provide employment opportunities for social workers in government agencies involved in international activities have been unsuccessful. A few social workers were placed in diplomatic missions in other countries as social welfare attachés in the 1960s, but this practice was discontinued. When the Peace Corps was established by President John F. Kennedy in 1961, social workers campaigned to persuade the Corps to give high priority to creating social service programs in developing countries, and to ensure that social workers played key roles in these programs. Although the Corps is involved in health-care and community development work, it has not given high priority to programs associated with professional social work. Although there is evidence that a significant number of social work students in the United States have served in the Peace Corps, it does not seem that many serve after they graduate.

Cultural competence is a vitally important aspect of social work practice in other countries. However, the importance of understanding cultural differences and practicing in a way that is sensitive to other cultures was not always emphasized. Nor was much attention paid to properly preparing social workers to practice in other countries. Often, no special preparation

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was thought to be necessary. In the past, many social workers who went abroad were counseled that all that was needed was a spirit of adventure, a friendly disposition, and a readiness to meet the challenges of living in another country. In addition, it was often naively assumed that the developing countries wanted to become economically and culturally similar to the industrial nations. Social workers from the United States and other industrial countries who went to work in developing countries were often regarded as agents of modernization who served to further strengthen the influence of Western culture in these societies (Midgley, 1981).

Today, the situation has changed, and there is a strong expectation that social workers who practice in other countries will be adequately prepared for the task. Great emphasis is now placed on cultural competence and on the need for social workers to be sensitive and respectful of cultural differences, as emphasized in chapter 4 and elsewhere in this text. This has placed new demands on schools of social work to provide specialized courses in international social work. It is also expected that conventional courses on cultural diversity will be broadened to include international content. The importance of language skills is also being stressed, and social workers seeking employment abroad are now encouraged to be fully acquainted with the economic, political, social, and cultural realities of the countries in which they intend to work.

International Social Work Practice in the Domestic Context

As a result of increased migration, travel, and globalization, social workers in many fields of practice in the United States now encounter international realities on a daily basis. Many more social workers routinely serve immigrant and refugee clients who come from other countries and have special needs. Many migrants are undocumented, work in low-paying jobs, are separated from their families, and face daunting challenges. For these reasons, immigrant families are likely to come into contact with social workers. However, the schools, health clinics, and family service agencies that employ social workers are seldom equipped to meet immigrants' unique needs. Although many immigrants are middle class and have well-paid jobs, they too may face challenges that come to the attention of professional social workers. Teenagers from immigrant families often face the challenges of cultural adjustment and of negotiating the demands of their parents, which may conflict with those of their peers. It is also more common today for Americans to have spouses or partners from other countries. Many meet their partners while traveling or studying abroad. Although the majority of these marriages are successful, problems may arise, and social workers who counsel these families need to understand their needs and circumstances. In dealing with these and other cases, social workers in the United States

need to know how to manage the challenges presented by clients whose lives have been affected by international and multicultural experiences.

Of course, there are specialized agencies in the United States that are equipped to respond to the needs of immigrants and refugees. They often employ bilingual social workers who have a special knowledge of the clients' cultures. Many of these agencies work with immigrants from particular countries or regions. In addition, agencies that specialize in particular forms of social work practice such as international adoption and international child custody have also become more common. These agencies represent what Healy (2001) describes as the "international/domestic interface," and they offer opportunities for social workers in the United States to engage in international social work without actually living and working abroad.

Healy (2001) estimates that Americans adopted 15,000 children from other countries in 1998. Although all adoption work requires specialist skills, international adoptions are particularly challenging and are undertaken by specialized agencies with highly trained staff. International adoption is often time consuming and expensive. Adopting parents are often required to travel abroad and meet the legal requirements of the child's country of origin and of U.S. immigration, as well as other requirements. Sometimes these visits fail, and the disappointed family may require special counseling. Although most international adoptions are successful, families nevertheless need support and advice on raising their children to meet the challenges of cultural adjustment. International adoption experts such as Victor Groza (1997) are strongly in favor of families assisting their adopted children to develop an awareness and sensitivity to their cultural heritage. Of course, they also need to be helped to understand the demands placed on them by American culture. Clearly, specialized social work skills are needed for this task.

International adoption is only one example of how specialist skills and knowledge in international social work are being applied in the United States today. Similar skills are needed by social workers in family agencies dealing with child custody cases involving a parent from another country, and in child abduction cases, when one parent takes a child abroad without the other's consent. Since these cases comprise only a small part of the growing number of international cases that social workers in the United States encounter, it no longer makes sense to view international social work practice as a highly specialized field that takes place when social workers go abroad to practice or when they find employment in international agencies. Today, the international is infused in the domestic to a far greater extent than ever before, and there is an urgent need for all social workers to be aware of how their daily practice is affected by international encounters. The need for social workers to be adequately prepared to deal with

these encounters poses a challenge for schools of social work to incorporate international and cross-cultural content into their curricula.

Challenges and Opportunities of International Social Work

As a result of improvements in communications, increased international migration, enhanced global trade, and the other forces of globalization that are fostering greater integration and interdependence among the world's nations, people are now more directly affected by international events. Compared to the situation a century ago, people today are better informed about developments in other countries, and many more people travel internationally and meet people from other cultures. This is affecting the way they experience and interpret the world. Although people's identities have historically been shaped by the immediate localities in which they live, growing numbers of people today have a greater appreciation for how their lives are affected by global change.

Like the members of other professions, social workers have been affected by the forces of globalization. As noted earlier, many American social workers are regularly required to address the needs of clients from other countries. Fortunately, social workers are recognizing the need to prepare themselves for these international realities. Some have made special efforts to enhance their knowledge of international events, and some have benefited from being better informed about social work in other parts of the world.

Many social workers find that greater engagement with international social work helps them appreciate the extent to which the problems they address are linked to global realities. This fosters a better understanding of human needs and social problems. Others recognize that international contacts enhance their professional skills. Some have adapted social work practice innovations from other countries and find that they are now better able to serve their clients. Although Hokenstad and Midgley (2004) suggest that it is increasingly common for social workers in the United States to apply innovations from other countries in their domestic work, the results are often improved when these innovations are applied with the appropriate modifications. Similarly, social workers usually find that learning about other cultures improves their knowledge of cultural diversity and their ability to practice competently.

Many social workers see their professional lives enriched as a result of engaging with their colleagues in other parts of the world. International exchanges in social work have clearly helped to promote the growth of social work as a profession, and they help individual practitioners enhance their knowledge and skills. By attending international conferences, reading international journals, and traveling to meet colleagues in other countries,

social workers share information and experiences and enhance their understanding of professional practice in other countries. All these factors contribute to social work's professional development and the improvement of professional practice.

Despite increased internationalization of the profession, many challenges remain (Midgley, 2001). Social workers need to be better informed about global developments and better prepared to meet the challenges posed by a rapidly changing world. Social workers in the United States are not always well informed about international events. Many are also ill informed about social work in other countries. For example, many social workers do not understand the nuances of globalization and how its multifaceted forces are affecting people's lives. There is a tendency in the academic literature to oversimplify the issues and to reduce globalization to rhetorical condemnations (Midgley, 2004). Unfortunately, the literature has not helped practitioners understand the dynamics of globalization and the intricate ways it affects social work practice.

The academic community has a special responsibility to promote international awareness among social work students. Of course, schools of social work have offered specialized courses in international social work and social welfare for many years. These courses became popular in the 1960s and 1970s, when Americans were exposed to events such as the Vietnam War and protests against it through television, cinema, and other media. It was also a time when knowledge about world poverty increased, and when many young people were inspired by the introduction of international aid programs in the developing countries. With the creation of the Peace Corps in the 1960s, and the growth of university student exchanges and summer abroad programs, many spent time abroad and wished to return to work abroad. Accordingly, demand for specialized courses on international social work increased, and many more students expressed an interest in doing their field placements in other countries.

Some schools of social work in the United States responded to this demand by creating specialized courses on international social work or international social welfare. Some created concentrations in international social work in graduate programs. For example, the School of Social Work at the University of Pennsylvania developed a concentration in international social development to provide specialized professional preparation for students interested in both international social work and the field of social development. Several other universities followed suit by establishing similar concentrations, and this was accompanied by the creation of field placements in other countries (see box 16.2). Specialized centers concerned with international social work, such as the Center for International Social Work Studies at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work, were also established.

Box 16.2 An MSW Field Placement in South Africa

Waking up every day in rural Mtubatuba, South Africa, had the unmistakable effect of making me feel like a child who is behind the scenes of her favorite television show. I never felt that I had enough time to observe or learn the countless components of the Zulu culture and social work practice in which I found myself immersed. I was engaged in numerous activities on any given day at the Africa Center, my internship site, especially since my supervisor was the only social worker in the agency. On my journey to the center each day along with other students and staff from countries around the world, I rode through Mtubatuba Town, which had awakened hours earlier. Upon my eight o'clock arrival, one or two clients were already seated, waiting to meet with me and my supervisor.

I did almost everything with my supervisor because she needed to translate for me until I learned to speak conversational Zulu. Another reason I needed to be with my supervisor is that my agency, an HIV/AIDS research institute, only supplied manual vehicles, which I didn't know how to drive. Because of this, I had a unique supervisory relationship. Rather than spending a few hours per week with my supervisor, we had an all-day, every-day relationship. My supervisor and I set aside the first hour of the day for interviewing clients who did not have access to a telephone for scheduling appointments. If my supervisor had prior notice about a client, she would brief me, and we would then conduct the interview. I saw women, men, children, adolescents, orphans, families, elders, and sick clients. I made action plans for client problems ranging from non-delivery of government grant money or spousal work benefits to children's behavior problems, orphan care, learn-

ing disabilities, and major crises due to health problems, disasters, and violence. After finishing the morning session, we traveled to homesteads within the very large service area of the Africa Center. These visits resulted from referrals given to my supervisor by staff conducting research within the community. Our objective for most visits was to conduct initial interviews or follow-up counseling sessions. We allotted most of our time each day to these visits, since at times the condition of the roads and the distance of the homes from the center delayed our travel. In the absence of street names or addresses, I became acutely aware of the value of neighbors, on whom we often had to rely for directions to a client's home.

In addition to making home visits, we met with community groups interested in becoming nonprofit organizations that would provide resources and care for their communities. We trained two of these groups to become child-care forums, groups responsible for identifying orphans and vulnerable children and marshalling resources for them. We met with the groups and conducted sessions on mapping, proposal and constitution writing, and application protocol. On occasion these training sessions would run from nine o'clock in the morning until three or four o'clock in the afternoon. Some of our sessions also involved project planning or completing a project with the group. One child-care forum, for example, applied for and received funding from my agency's charitable fund in order to buy groceries for twenty needy families it had identified in its area. We assisted in receiving the funds, opening a bank account, and delivering the food parcels to the community. Within the course of my day, I might also attend interdisciplinary staff meetings at the

Box 16.2 Continued

office, since my agency employed people in several different professions. At times staff conducted these meetings in Zulu, and I attempted to listen actively and participate with my limited Zulu proficiency. Although I often worked through teatime and lunchtime, I did enjoy these breaks because I gained

more experience with Zulu speakers who were willing to help me sharpen my language skills and teach me about their culture.

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This was an impressive initial commitment to international activities at schools of social work. However, much more needs to be done if social work is to prepare practitioners to meet the challenges posed by global social change. Schools of social work, and the profession generally, need to devote much more time and energy to international challenges. Many complex problems still need to be solved. For example, the problem of cultural conflicts that arise when indigenous practices contradict Western humanitarian ideals still needs to be fully debated. The situation in Iraq is a prime example. The incorporation of international human rights thinking and practice into social work also needs more attention. The profession's commitment to social justice needs to be broadened to more vigorously respond to the flagrant abuses of human rights that occur in all parts of the world, including the United States and other industrial countries. A controversial example is the United Nations' call for the United States to shut down its prison at the U.S. Naval Air Base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and either bring to trial or release the approximately five hundred detainees there, most of whom were captured during the war in Afghanistan.

At a time when several American schools of social work are providing technical assistance to schools of social work in other countries, or offering professional education in other countries, avoiding professional imperialism (Midgley, 1981) and developing mutually reciprocal exchanges that promote the sharing of experiences between equal partners are critical. Social work also needs to grapple with the issue of whether cultural and national identity is compatible with the ideals of global citizenship. Although many social workers support efforts to promote international cooperation, they may question the need to promote an ideology of internationalism within the profession. Current approaches to international social work need broadening. The view that international social work is a highly specialized field should be challenged, and efforts to mainstream international social work should be redoubled. As social workers everywhere become more aware of the importance of international events in their daily professional lives, international social work will hopefully

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become a commonplace reality. The profession will then be better prepared to respond to the increasingly interdependent and integrated world in which we live, and better able to serve those who seek our help.

SUMMARY

International social work has become more prominent in social work education and practice. The growing immigrant population in the United States means that international social work practice is no longer confined to work abroad or international agencies with offices in the United States. The Council on Social Work Education has placed more emphasis on preparing students for practice in a world in which globalization is progressing at a rapid pace. Social work students are encouraged to take courses that will broaden their knowledge of other countries and other cultures in order to become politically and culturally astute. Proficiency in languages in addition to English is highly valuable. Social work has important roles to play, not only in delivering traditional social welfare services in an international context, but in helping to promote understanding across the borders of all countries.

SUGGESTED READING

Banerjee, D. (2000). *So you want to join the Peace Corps: What to know before you go*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press. A former Peace Corps volunteer addresses the concerns you might have about this important decision, from packing tips and living among the locals to medical services and staying in touch with friends and family at home. The book tells the stories of the experiences of volunteers, and statements of Peace Corps policy are provided for guidance.

Ferguson, I., Lavelette, M., & Whitmore, E. (Eds.). (2005). *Globalisation, global justice and social work*. London: Routledge. This book explores the global effects of neoliberal policies on welfare services in different countries, with contributions from social work academics, practitioners, and welfare activists around the world.

Hokenstad, M. C., & Midgley, J. (Eds.). (2004). *Lessons from abroad: Adapting international social welfare innovations*. Washington, DC: NASW Press. The contributors to this volume examine how domestic policies and practice can be enhanced through the documentation, analysis, and judicious adaptation of innovative approaches emanating from other countries in aging, child welfare, social security, mental health, and other areas.

International Social Work. This journal on issues relevant to international social work and social development is sponsored by the International Federation of Social Workers, the International Council on Social Work Education, and the International Association of Schools of Social Work. Published by Sage, it can be accessed at <http://isw.sagepub.com>.

McMichael, P. (2004). *Development and social change: A global perspective* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press. This volume discusses social change and development from a sociological perspective and examines the distribution of the world's material wealth and how noncommercial cultures view wealth.

THE WORLD WIDE WEB OF SOCIAL WORK

American Friends Service Committee <http://www.afsc.org>

This organization carries out service, development, social justice, and peace programs throughout the world. AFSC's work attracts the support and partnership of people of many races, religions, and cultures.

Global Social Work <http://hometown.aol.com/egeratylsw/globalsw.html>

This is an Internet-based international social work community for social workers, human services workers, humanitarian aid workers, and human rights organizations.

Global Social Work Network <http://www.gsw.com>

This organization provides information about licensing, education, and career opportunities. Networking is facilitated through a message board.

Peace Corps <http://www.peacecorps.gov>

This organization was established in 1961 to promote world peace and friendship. Its goals are to help other nations by supplying trained men and women and promoting an understanding of America and Americans, and a better understanding within America of other countries.

UNESCO http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=29008&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization was founded in 1945. UNESCO promotes international cooperation among its 191 member states and six associate members in the fields of education, science, culture, and communication.

UNHCR <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home>

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was established in 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly. The agency is mandated to lead and coordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide.

