



Opening Keynote Address by Prof. Walter Lorenz

Social Workers Practising Social Rights Against the Erosion of Social Solidarity – Lessons from the Corona Crisis”

Abstract

Worldwide, public and also social services in recent decades, in the wake of neoliberalism, have become subject to privatization and commodification which emphasise “choice”. The current Corona Crisis demonstrates the profound shortcomings of these policies when the necessity of state control conflicts with assertions of personal liberty. In this social policy context, it has become ever harder for social workers to deliver social interventions as expressing rights rather than individual choice. Social work’s key instrument is the personal relationship, albeit by placing this in a socio-political context. Competent social work interventions straddle the private and the public realm, but also care and (legitimated) control, thereby defining the nature of what is “social” in society as something “binding”. Human, civil and social rights express the binding elements of solidarity but for people at increasing risk of exclusion rights of inclusion must become first a lived reality.

Social work as the practice of rights requires: 1. Basing change processes on genuine participation rather than on prescriptions; 2. Recognising the multiple dimensions of personal “problems” (psychological, social, economic, political and indeed environmental), each implying different yet linked dimensions of “relationships”; 3. Tracing and shaping the various facets of social belonging through skilled professional relationships; 4. Taking the gaps in social rights, which may become apparent in the process, as a stimulus for actions aimed at the level of social policy-making in order to create and improve conditions of justice and equality; and 5. Promoting continuous educational opportunities to foster skills of reflexivity, systemic analysis and planning as well as effective political action for carrying out these complex tasks. These references to core principles should encourage social workers to strengthen civic engagement as part of their professional skills repertoire and to assert their vital role in fighting the pernicious social consequences of the Corona Crisis.



Prof. Walter Lorenz



Walter Lorenz was professor of social work at University College, Cork in Ireland (1978-2001) and at the Free University of Bozen / Bolzano in Italy (2001-2017) where he served also two 4-year terms as Rector. He is currently contract professor at Bozen and Charles University Prague. A native of Germany, he qualified as a social worker at the London School of Economics and practised this profession for 8 years in East London. His research interests cover anti-racism practice and current and historical aspects of European social work and social policy. He co-founded the European Journal of Social Work and Social Work & Society and was awarded honorary doctorates from the universities of Ghent and Aalborg.