

International Advocacy by Social Workers and SDGs in Japan

Japan Association of Social Workers

International Committee

Yutaka Takamine

Introduction

- Systematic international advocacy by Japanese social worker bodies has been moderate. This seems to have to do with Japan's long economic stagnations, which has reduced its economic power and the public is turning inward. This is in contrast with the economic bubble period when in 1989, ODA (national development assistance) amounts appeared to be No. 1 in the world.
- The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs: 2000-2015), which were initiatives before the SDGs, were little known in Japan, but the SDGs became well known in Japan because they include 17 broad targets, including global warming. As proof of this, they are daily reported on in the media.
- Since the SDGs themselves have much in common with the Global Agenda, the Japan Federation of Social Workers (JFSW) also needs to state its policies in order to systematically address international advocacy.

The current situation in the field of welfare in Japan (I)

- After the war, Japan was able to expand to the world and develop through economic activities. During this economic development period, Japanese were referred to as 'economic animals', but in other fields, there was not much advance. It was said that "Japan sends money, but not people".
- The Care Worker and Social Welfare Worker Act was enacted in 1987, and the Mental Health Welfare Workers Act was enacted in 1997, thus qualifications were established by the state.
- These qualified personnel are considered to be responsible for the implementation of the six laws related to national welfare, and there are few opportunities for policy advocacy.

The current situation in the field of welfare in Japan (II)

- The Social Welfare Act was greatly revised in 2000 and the welfare system shifted from a mandate-based one to a contract-based one, but it yet to reach a rights-based system. The Right to Live is guaranteed by the Constitution, but it is suppressed to the minimum level.
- Since the current Social Welfare Worker and Mental Health Welfare Worker system plays a role in the domestic welfare system, it is difficult for such workers to be interested in non-domestic and international issues. In particular, there are few efforts to address human rights issues.

Citizens are not conscious of human rights

- In general, the socially vulnerable persons are considered as an object of mercy and they are not considered as equal. The theory of self-responsibility is dominant.
- There is criticism that even if barrier-free measures for people with disabilities advance, they are part of welfare policy and not a rights-based system. This is why it is said to be as system fo 'barrier-free with no dignity'.
- An independent Human Rights Committee is yet to be established too.

Discrimination against foreign nationals and human rights violations

- The Foreign Technical Intern Training system has been abused, and the human rights of foreign workers have been neglected.
- There are prejudices and discriminations, such as hate speech against historical minority Koreans in Japan.
- Under the national immigration system, long-term detention has become a daily occurrence, and there are many cases where people die of illness while being detained.
- Japan is a country that 'accepts laborers but does not accept immigrants'. It is a country that does not accept refugees. Is it possible to maintain the country with declining birthrates and an aging population?

Interest in international social work and international cooperation

- Since Dr. Mariko Kimura was elected to President of the Asia-Pacific Region of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the Japan Federation of Social Workers (JFSW), especially its International Committee has started planning workshops and other events with other Asian countries. As a result, social workers' interest in issues in other Asian countries has gradually increased.
- JFSW has also started international advocacy activities on human rights issues under IFSW initiatives.

Recommendations for advocacy on human rights and social justice (I)

- It is also necessary to express opinions on human rights issues inside Japan domestically. For example, shouldn't social worker bodies express their views on human rights violations against foreigners regarding recent deaths at immigration facilities?
- Shouldn't there be policy statements from social worker bodies on long-term social hospitalization in psychiatric hospitals, abuse in facilities for disabled persons and elderly persons, discrimination against Hansen's disease patients, LGBTQ+ issues, same-sex marriage, and voluntary separate family name after marriage, etc ?

Recommendations for advocacy on human rights and social justice (II)

- In the field of banning discrimination, only the Act on the Elimination of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities was enacted. This is because disability groups themselves engaged in strong advocacy. Regarding human rights issues, it is necessary to team up with such social movements by people in the community because they are leading the way.
- Also, the government has to be engaged with regard to the establishment of an independent Human Rights Committee.

Working towards the SDGs

- The SDGs should be incorporated into social work education and the curriculum in order to provide an opportunity for Japanese social workers to turn their attention to international issues.
- While focusing on “Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being”, we should provide guidelines for addressing other goals too.
- “Social change” and “Leaving no one behind” are the foundations of the SDGs, and align with the Global Definition of Social Work and our Code of Ethics. Approaches that incorporate human rights, social justice and diversity into the 17 goals are expected.
- In particular, we will have to work in partnership together with other organizations on post COVID-19 initiatives and measures against global warming.

Conclusion

Japan has not been much involved in international issues, except for economic activities. The SDGs provide an opportunity to raise interest in international issues.

Social workers in Japan will have a stronger voice internationally by tackling domestic issues of human rights, social justice, and diversity.