

# Bridging the gap: Incorporating theoretical and methodological aspects of the sustainable development goals into social work curriculum

## Challenge

Relating the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to the field of social work is intricately connected to discussions about the fair distribution of resources at the local, regional, national, and global levels and therefore to the question of global social inequality. However, for many social work students, grasping the local-versus-global difference in social work is a challenge. Although they understand the global relevance of the social problems addressed by the SDGs, they struggle to relate those problems to their local practice. As a consequence, the SDGs are at risk of remaining abstract goals for social workers, ones that are disconnected from social work practice at the local and regional levels.

The International Federation of Social Workers's 2021 policy paper (IFSW 2021) is especially relevant in the context of this challenge. The policy paper states:



*“To ensure an effective use of the instrument the UN SDGs provide to social work and vice versa, it is important to clarify social work's very own definition and understanding of the terms *sustainability*, *development* and *goals*, particularly because social work is giving this mandate to itself.” (IFSW 2021)*

## TOMA-model

At the faculty of social work introduces the so-called TOMA model of a social work curriculum as a best-practice approach to incorporating the SDGs into social work curriculum has been developed. Referring to the theory (T), organization (O), methods (M), and application (A) of implementing the SDGs in social work and teaching them in relation to social inequality, the TOMA model was introduced at Germany's University of Applied Sciences Landshut 15 years ago. In the years since, the topic of environmental justice in the context of climate change has been integrated into the TOMA model and connected to the SDGs. Following the model, over the course of three semesters students complete seminars focused on the theory, organization, methods, and application of social problems due to climate change in social work.

3.5: Theoretical Dimensions of Eco-Social Social Work and Environmental Justice

4.5: Methodological Aspects of Eco-Social Social Work and Environmental Justice

6.5: Practical Dimensions of Eco-Social Social Work and Environmental Justice

First semester	General courses in social work, sociology, psychology, educational science, and social law			
Second semester	General courses in social work, the social sciences, and social law			
<b>TOMA</b>	<b>Culture and diversity</b>	<b>Social space</b>	<b>Health and well-being</b>	<b>Social inequality and social justice</b>
Third semester	<b>Theory and organization (TO)</b>	<b>Theory and organization (TO)</b>	<b>Theory and organization (TO)</b>	<b>Theory and organization (TO)</b>
Fourth semester	<b>Methods (M)</b>	<b>Methods (M)</b>	<b>Methods (M)</b>	<b>Methods (M)</b>
Fifth semester	Field practicum (supervised)			
Sixth semester	<b>Application (A)</b>	<b>Application (A)</b>	<b>Application (A)</b>	<b>Application (A)</b>
Seventh semester	General courses in social work			

## Conclusion

One of the most valuable aspects of the TOMA model is its flexibility. Without changing the entire curriculum, the model enables including new aspects into social work programs. The model's four topics—culture and diversity, social space, health and well-being, and social inequality and social justice—can be viewed as providing a theoretical framework, one closely connected to the primary documents of the global social work community. Meanwhile, its compatibility with the “Global Definition of Social Work” (IFSW 2014) and the “Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training” (IASSW 2018) can be viewed as being especially valuable for effecting further changes in the curriculum of social work programs. As shown at the University of Applied Sciences Landshut, it is possible to include seminars that address social work and climate change in a systematic way. However, in the same way, other aspects of the SDGs could be chosen and incorporated into social work programs as well.