Lambert K. Engelbrecht[1] and Mpumelelo E. Ncube[2]

[1]*Stellenbosch University, Department of Social Work, Stellenbosch, South Africa*
 https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6549-7183 ✉lke@sun.ac.za

[2] *University of the Free State, Department of Social Work, Bloemfontein, South Africa*
 https://orcid.org/00000002-4611-149X ✉ ncubeme@ufs.ac.za

EDITORIAL

Interdisciplinary pathways for advancing social justice, peace, and sustainable development in social work education and professional practice

This issue of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* celebrates the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions (ASASWEI) and the journal's diamond jubilee, highlighting interdisciplinary scholarship that advances social justice, peace, and sustainable development in social work education and practice. It includes a special article, ten research studies, a book review, and a note from practice. Together, these contributions demonstrate how research, education, and practice intersect to strengthen professional capacity, inform policy, and foster transformative interventions for individuals, families, and communities.

From 10 to 12 September 2025, ASASWEI will convene its biennial International Conference, hosted by the Department of Social Work at the University of the Free State. The event is expected to attract a diverse audience of academics, students, practitioners, and retirees from both local and international contexts. Notably, the conference has also drawn scholarly interest from cognate disciplines such as Sociology, Community Development, Psychology, Criminology, and the Disaster Management Training and Education Centre for Africa. This cross-disciplinary engagement reflects the multidisciplinary orientation of the conference theme: *Advancing social, economic, and environmental justice, peacebuilding, and sustainable development through teaching, research, and practice.*

Torok and Korazim-Kosy (2011) underscore the importance of interdisciplinarity in social work education. Addressing complex, systemic challenges, such as those encapsulated in the conference theme, requires an integrated approach that enables social workers to fully grasp the breadth of the issues at stake and to devise nuanced interventions **(**Briggs, Chen & Combs,

2018**).** Interdisciplinarity shifts the focus from addressing isolated symptoms to tackling the structural roots of problems, fostering sustainable and transformative change. Furthermore, it encourages creative and innovative strategies for addressing contemporary challenges **(**Briggs, Chen & Combs, 2018**).**

The conference theme comprises three central strands: socio-economic and environmental justice, peacebuilding, and sustainable development. These focal areas are not only urgent in the present moment but are also likely to shape the realities of future generations. In relation to environmental justice**,** Lenton (2020) and Foster (2022) argue that while global attention is fixed on the climate crisis, the rapid pace of environmental degradation calls for immediate, practical interventions, no matter how modest, that could collectively help avert catastrophe.

Given ongoing armed conflicts in Africa, including those in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as in the Middle East, most notably the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Gaza attributed to Israeli military actions, the role of social work education, research, and practice in contributing to peacebuilding warrants critical examination. Dominelli (2002) and Krueger (2013**)** emphasise the application of social work principles to peacebuilding and social justice, particularly in both conflict and post-conflict contexts.

The third strand, sustainable development, is particularly pertinent in a period when South Africa, among other African countries, faces unprecedented levels of unemployment and inequality. These socio-economic challenges, while rooted in historical legacies, are sustained by structural political, economic, and educational barriers that perpetuate poverty and social exclusion for large segments of the population **(**Munyewende & Rispel, 2014; Ncube, 2020; Noble et al., 2013). The conference will therefore present educational and practice-based approaches aimed at effectively addressing these systemic challenges.

The event will also explore teaching, learning, research, and professional practice as vehicles through which the stature of social work can be strengthened, particularly through collaboration with related disciplines, in advancing social, economic, and environmental justice, peacebuilding, and sustainable development. Preceding the conference, the Heads of Departments of Social Work nationwide will hold a summit focusing on repositioning academic programmes to align with evolving national and global priorities. On the first day of the conference, delegates will participate in an outdoor event planting 100 trees, partially aligning with the theme and commemorating National Arbor Week. On the second day, excellence in teaching, research, and engaged scholarship will be recognised during a cultural evening. Collectively, these activities will provide a platform for knowledge exchange, discussion of practical interventions, and professional networking.

To mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of ASASWEI and the diamond jubilee of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, this issue presents a special contribution by **Qian Meng and Mel Gray** on linking themes in rural and environmental social work. They explore how integrating research on environmental justice, sustainability, poverty, and rural communities can strengthen social work's environmental engagement, enhancing its transformative role in promoting sustainable development and addressing interconnected challenges facing vulnerable populations and the natural environment.

Ten research articles follow. **Adrian van Breda and Judith Reynolds** present a comprehensive scoping review of research on family resilience in South Africa, examining 59 studies from 2004 to 2023. They identify significant gaps in social work research, particularly in relation to families' broader social contexts, and offer recommendations to strengthen both practice and scholarship in this field.

In the next article, **Mulalo Musetsho**, **Mimie Sesoko**, **and Goitseone Leburu** explore grandmother-headed families' experiences of foster care awareness programmes. Using qualitative interviews, they show how shared learning improves communication, parenting, and financial management, promoting household stability. They recommend expanding such programmes and incorporating group and community-based social work strategies. **Isheanotida Makosa and colleagues** examine socio-economic factors contributing to juvenile delinquency in Zimbabwe. Using qualitative interviews with caregivers and key informants, they identify poverty, peer influence, broken homes, substance use, and media exposure as key contributors, highlighting the role of social workers in promoting positive parenting and supportive environments to prevent delinquency. **Nkanyiso Nkazimulo Mkhize**, **Matshemo Joyce Moganedi**, **and Frank Selelo Rapholo** investigate how the South African social work curriculum can empower students with entrepreneurial skills. Drawing on empowerment theory, they argue for integrating entrepreneurship into social work education to address graduate unemployment and poverty, enabling graduates to meet labour market demands and contribute meaningfully to society.

In an exploration of community-based learning in child and youth care, **Raisuyah Bhagwan** examines community–university partnerships in rural KwaZulu-Natal. Through qualitative interviews with final-year students, the study highlights the importance of trust, clear communication, and shared goals, showing how such partnerships enhance student learning and foster sustainable community engagement. **Faith Mathibel**a **and Petro Botha** examine social workers' perspectives on supporting parents of adolescents recovering from substance use disorder in Tshwane, Gauteng. Using the Intervention Design and Development model, they underscore the importance of holistic support to equip parents with skills and knowledge for effective coping and fostering adolescent recovery. Also employing a qualitative approach, **Morne Holland and Mariette van der Merwe** explore rape survivors' narratives in the Northern Cape, revealing survivors' post-traumatic growth, coping strategies, and the role of spirituality, social support, and systemic challenges. The study offers valuable insights for social work practice and intervention.

Qualitative data also inform the study by **Ashwill Phillips**, who investigates gangs in the Free State, tracing their emergence to social exclusion, inequality, and limited opportunities. Using interviews with offenders and service providers, the study analyses motivations, risks, and protective factors, including prosocial activities and employment, with implications for social work interventions, policy development, and youth support strategies. **Sunday Fakunmoju and Shahana Rasool** draw on data from 454 adults to investigate how perceptions, past victimisation, and prior perpetration influence psychological abuse, including verbal aggression, isolation, neglect, and economic abuse. They find that past abuse strongly predicts future behaviours, younger adults are more prone to economic abuse, and social workers should

implement trauma-informed interventions, prevention strategies, and educational and policy initiatives to disrupt the cycle of abuse. In the final article, **Tumelo Sekgobela** examines bullying as a pervasive form of aggression in schools, drawing on qualitative interviews with social workers in Limpopo. The study reveals their understanding of bullying and recommends ongoing training and increased recruitment to strengthen social work interventions in educational settings.

In the book review section, **Selelo Frank Rapholo** reviews *The Handbook on Social Protection and Social Development in the Global South*, edited by Leila Patel**,** Sophie Plagerson**,** and Isaac Chinyoka (2023). This accessible volume explores the shift from residual to developmental approaches in addressing social problems, situating social protection within broader welfare and development systems. Well aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, it offers valuable insights for poverty reduction, zero hunger, and improved health and well-being in the Global South.

This issue concludes with a note from practice by **Abigail Ornellas** on digital parenting interventions to prevent violence against adolescents. Drawing on the *ParentApp for Teens* trial in Tanzania. She considers its relevance for South African social work, underscoring its potential to strengthen prevention, extend services to excluded households, promote gender transformative practice, and optimise resources.

Collectively, the special contribution article, research articles, book review, and note from practice in this issue make a valuable contribution to the dissemination of original research. They illuminate the diverse and innovative ways in which social work research, education, and practice intersect to advance social justice, foster peace, and promote sustainable development, thereby reinforcing the profession's vital role in addressing the complex challenges of contemporary societies.

Lambert K. Engelbrecht   **Mpumelelo E. Ncube**
Editor-in-Chief   *SWMW* **Board Member**
Department of Social Work, SU   **Academic Head: Department of Social Work, UFS**
September 2025   **ASASWEI Vice President (2023-2025)**

REFERENCES

Briggs, H. E., Chen, H. Y., & Combs, G. M. (2018). Social science–environmental health collaborations: Advancing interdisciplinary understanding of environmental health problems. *Environmental Health Perspectives*, *126*(10), 104002. https://doi.org/10.1289/EHP3045

Dominelli, L. (2002). Peace, social justice and social work. *International Social Work*, *45*(3), 293–308.

Foster, J. (2022). Introduction: Hope, realism and the climate crisis. In: T. M. Lenton (Ed), *Tipping positive change*. (pp. 1-13). Bristol University Press. http://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2019.0123

Krueger, T. (2013). The role of social workers in post-conflict reconstruction. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, *8*(1), 59–72.

Munyewende, P. O., & Rispel, L. C. (2014). Understanding social determinants of health in South Africa: The role of social work. *International Social Work, 57*(5), 393–404. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872813505810

Ncube, M. E. (2020). Developmental social work practice and social welfare perspectives in building healthy human relationships in South Africa. In N. Noyoo (Ed.), *Promoting healthy human relationships in post-apartheid South Africa* (pp. 201–211). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-50139-6

Noble, M., Wright, G., & Roberts, B. (2013). Poverty, inequality, and social development in South Africa: Key trends and policy implications. *Development Southern Africa, 30*(2), 249–264. https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2013.796961

Torok, P., & Korazim-Kosy, Y. (2011). Interdisciplinarity in social work education and training in Hungary. *International Social Work, 55*(2) 185–204.