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SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION

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From Copenhagen to Doha: A critical reflection on the reconfiguring of social development, knowledge and authority through global social work

ABSTRACT

Thirty years after the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, the Second World Summit in Doha in 2025 offered an opportunity to reconsider how social development is understood and governed. This paper examines the shift from state-centred political commitment towards more distributed and multi-actor forms of governance. Drawing on a governmentality perspective, it explores how social development is framed across key summit documents, organisational contributions and civil society interventions. A comparison between Copenhagen and Doha reveals not a linear progression, but changing configurations of authority, participation and expertise. While civil society actors and professional organisations, including social work, have gained increased visibility, their inclusion remains shaped by unequal power relations and institutional constraints. The paper further examines how social work contributes practice-based and relational perspectives within global governance while navigating dominant technocratic approaches. Particular attention is given to the four-partner collaboration between IASSW, ICSW, ICSD and IFSW as a coordinated form of agenda-setting and collaborative engagement. The findings suggest that social development is increasingly shaped through processes of coordination, alignment and collective knowledge generation, raising important questions about depoliticisation, representation and whose perspectives are recognised within global governance.

Keywords: civil society participation; epistemic authority; governmentality; multi-stakeholder governance; social development; social work advocacy

INTRODUCTION: PROBLEMATISING SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AFTER COPENHAGEN

Thirty years after the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen (United Nations [UN], 1995b), the convening of the Second World Summit for Social Development in Doha (UN, 2025) invited renewed reflection on the trajectories, transformations and tensions that shape global social development. While the 1995 World Summit for Social Development has frequently been portrayed as a landmark moment of political commitment to social development and poverty reduction (Fukuda-Parr & Hulme, 2011; Hujo, 2021; Hulme, 2013), bringing together an exceptionally high number of heads of state and advancing a comprehensive Programme of Action, the Doha Summit emerges in a markedly different geopolitical and institutional landscape. Rather than assuming a linear progression from Copenhagen to Doha, this paper asks how social development has been reshaped over time, not only in terms of priorities, but also in relation to the actors involved, the forms of knowledge mobilised and the ways in which authority is exercised.

From this perspective, global summits are not merely sites of political negotiation, but arenas in which particular understandings of social reality are formulated, stabilised and contested (Foucault, 2001a, 2001b, 2002). As has been argued in relation to other domains of governance, such processes rely on forms of knowledge that render social phenomena thinkable and governable in specific ways (Dean, 2010; Inda, 2005b; Rudin, 2020). Social development, in this sense, does not constitute a neutral or self-evident field of intervention, but is continuously produced through discursive practices that define its priorities, its legitimate actors and the means through which it is to be pursued. The comparison between Copenhagen and Doha therefore provides an entry point for examining how these discursive formations have been reshaped over time, and how they continue to shape the conditions under which social development is governed.

A first point of departure for such an analysis lies in the apparent decline in high-level political representation at the Doha Summit, with significantly fewer heads of state participating compared to 1995. At first glance, this may suggest a diminishing political relevance of social development within global agendas. However, such an interpretation risks overlooking broader transformations in the architecture of global governance (Fairbanks, 2012; Ferguson & Gupta, 2005; Grugel & Piper, 2007; Larner, 2004). Rather than indicating a simple withdrawal of state interest, this development reflects a redistribution of authority across a more heterogeneous set of actors, including international organisations, civil society networks and professional bodies (Jaeger, 2007; Sommerer et al., 2022; Wessler et al., 2017). The question that emerges is therefore not one of decline, but of redistribution: how authority is dispersed, how it is enacted, and how it is legitimised within increasingly complex governance arrangements.

At the same time, the increased visibility of civil society within the structures of the Doha Summit points to an expansion of participation that was less pronounced in 1995. Yet, as has

been observed in other governance contexts, the incorporation of additional actors does not necessarily entail a corresponding shift in decision-making power (Bäckstrand & Söderbaum, 2018; Scholte, 2004). Instead, such inclusion may operate within predefined institutional parameters that delimit the scope of influence. Civil society thus appears to occupy an ambivalent position, simultaneously being recognised as a relevant stakeholder while remaining constrained in its capacity to shape outcomes. This ambivalence is not incidental, but indicative of a broader transformation in governance, in which participation is expanded while remaining structured through persistent asymmetries of power (Foucault, 1991, 2001a).

Within this evolving landscape, the role of professional actors such as social work warrants particular attention. Historically positioned at the intersection of practice, policy and advocacy, social work has increasingly engaged with international governance arenas, including through the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). Through its involvement in United Nations processes, IFSW contributes to the framing of social development in ways that draw on practice-based knowledges and ethical principles (IFSW, 2025; Rudin, 2024). This raises important questions regarding the extent to which social work can be understood as a participant in global governance, as well as the implications of this positioning for the profession itself. At stake is not only institutional presence, but the recognition of particular forms of knowledge and ways of knowing within global policy processes.

A further development that reflects broader shifts in governance is the intensified collaboration between international social work and social development actors, including the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), the International Consortium for Social Development (ICSD) and IFSW. Their coordinated engagement across three jointly supported panels, each led by one partner and substantively supported by the others, alongside a jointly prepared roundtable intervention, points to a shift towards more distributed and collaborative forms of knowledge production and agenda-setting.

Rather than being confined to institutional silos, social development discourse appears increasingly co-produced across organisational boundaries, raising questions about authority, legitimacy and the circulation of knowledge (Quiroga-Villamarín & Mansouri, 2025). This development is particularly significant insofar as it points to emerging forms of epistemic coordination that operate alongside, and at times reshape, more traditional institutional arrangements.

The analytical approach adopted in this paper draws on a governmentality perspective to examine how social development is constituted as an object of governance. Governmentality, as conceptualised by Foucault (1991) and further elaborated by scholars such as Dean (2010), directs attention to the rationalities, techniques and forms of knowledge through which social phenomena are rendered governable. Rather than focusing solely on institutions or formal decision-making processes, it emphasises how governance operates through particular ways of understanding and defining problems, influencing both how they are interpreted and which interventions are seen as appropriate. In addition, the analysis engages with discourse analytical approaches that highlight the role of language, representation and knowledge in shaping social realities (Jäger & Maier, 2010; Link, 1992). The paper draws on summit documents,

organisational contributions and processes surrounding the Doha Summit to examine how social development is framed, whose perspectives are prioritised and how authority is distributed within global governance.

In doing so, the paper contributes to the literature on global social policy and governance in several ways. First, it extends analyses of the Copenhagen Summit by situating it within a longer trajectory that now also includes the Doha Summit, thereby enabling a comparative perspective on the transformation of social development over three decades. While previous studies have examined the normative and institutional significance of Copenhagen (Fukuda-Parr & Hulme, 2011; Hujo, 2021), less attention has been devoted to how these commitments have been reconceptualised within contemporary governance regimes. Second, the paper contributes to debates on multi-stakeholder governance by moving beyond questions of participation to examine the conditions under which different forms of knowledge are produced, recognised and mobilised. Third, and most importantly, it advances an analysis of the four-partner collaboration as an epistemic practice that helps illuminate how authority is being reconstituted within global social development.

It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the Second World Summit for Social Development as a site in which the governance of social development is being reconfigured. Drawing on a comparative perspective on the 1995 and 2025 summits, it analyses the shifting role of states, the expanding yet constrained position of civil society, and the growing significance of professional actors such as social work. In doing so, it argues that the Doha Summit reflects a shift from state-centred political commitment towards distributed and multi-actor forms of governance, in which authority is increasingly enacted through collaborative forms of knowledge production and coordination, while remaining framed by enduring asymmetrical power relations.

For social work, this creates both opportunities and challenges: opportunities to shape global agendas through its distinctive forms of knowledge, and challenges in navigating the conditions under which such knowledge is recognised and translated within complex governance environments. In this way, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on the profession's role in global governance by reframing social work not only as a practice-based profession, but as an actor engaged in struggles over epistemic authority, that is, struggles over who is able to define social problems, which forms of knowledge are recognised as legitimate, and which responses are considered appropriate within global governance processes.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH AND SITUATED PERSPECTIVE

This paper adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in discourse analysis (Jäger, 2015; Jäger & Maier, 2010) and a governmentality perspective (Foucault, 1991). The empirical material consists of a purposive selection of documents and artefacts related to the Second World Summit for Social Development in Doha and its historical reference point in Copenhagen. These materials were selected because they were formally embedded in summit processes or played a visible role in shaping civil society contributions. These include official United Nations documents, in particular the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action (UN, 1995a) and the Doha Political Declaration (UN General Assembly, 2025), as well as

summit-related materials such as concept notes, panel descriptions and publicly available organisational contributions, including those produced by IFSW and partner organisations. This also includes concept notes, panel documentation and jointly produced interventions associated with the four-partner collaboration, which provide insights into how civil society contributions were framed within the Summit process.

The analysis focuses on how social development is problematised across these materials, that is, how social issues are discursively constituted, rendered intelligible, and linked to particular forms of intervention and authority (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 1991; Inda, 2005b). This involved iterative coding of key ways of defining social problems, actor configurations and forms of knowledge across documents, with particular attention to shifts between Copenhagen and Doha. Rather than seeking to measure outcomes or evaluate effectiveness, the approach examines the discursive construction of social development, paying attention to the categories, rationalities and forms of knowledge through which it is constituted as an object of governance. Particular attention is devoted to shifts in the positioning of actors, the distribution of authority and the role of knowledge in shaping governance processes.

The analysis proceeds through a comparative reading of Copenhagen and Doha, combined with a focused examination of selected summit processes, including the four-partner collaboration, because these provide particularly visible sites in which social development was framed, negotiated, and represented. These are treated not as exhaustive representations of the summits, but as analytically significant sites through which broader transformations in global social development governance can be observed. The aim is therefore not to provide a comprehensive empirical account, but to develop a theoretically informed interpretation of how social development is being reordered within contemporary global governance.

The analysis presented in this paper is informed by the author's professional involvement in global social development processes, including engagement with IFSW and participation in activities related to the Second World Summit for Social Development. This positioning provides insight into institutional dynamics, organisational practices and processes of knowledge production that may not be fully visible through publicly available documents, while also requiring reflexive awareness of the limitations and partialities that such proximity inevitably introduces (Willig, 2008; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2013). At the same time, it requires reflexive awareness of the ways in which proximity to these processes may shape interpretation.

Rather than assuming a position of external neutrality, this paper approaches the analysis as situated within the field it examines (Reinharz, 2017). The aim is not to provide an insider account, but to critically engage with the conditions under which social development is formulated and governed, including those in which the author is implicated. This reflexive positioning is consistent with the analytical framework adopted, which emphasises the co-constitution of knowledge, power and subjectivity within governance processes (Foucault, 1991; Dean, 2010).

REIMAGINING SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT: FROM POLITICAL COMMITMENT TO DISTRIBUTED GOVERNANCE

The World Summit for Social Development held in Copenhagen in 1995 has frequently been described as a historic moment in the institutionalisation of social development within the global policy arena (Fukuda-Parr & Hulme, 2011; Hujo, 2021; Hulme, 2013). Bringing together delegates from 186 countries, including 117 Heads of State or Government, the Summit marked an unprecedented level of political engagement with issues of poverty, employment and social integration (UN, 1995b). The adoption of the Copenhagen Declaration and its accompanying Programme of Action advanced a comprehensive and, at the time, widely shared commitment to placing 'people at the centre of development' (UN, 1995a). This formulation did not simply express a normative vision. It also redefined development by shifting attention from economic growth alone towards human wellbeing and social cohesion.

The Declaration further established a normative consensus around three core priorities: the eradication of poverty, the promotion of full and productive employment, and the fostering of social integration (UN, 1995a). These priorities were embedded within a broader vision that positioned social development as both an ethical imperative and a political project requiring coordinated action at national and international levels. Importantly, the Copenhagen Summit did not simply identify social problems, but contributed to stabilising a particular way of understanding them. Poverty, unemployment and social fragmentation were rendered governable (Inda, 2005a) through an approach that linked them to policy commitments, institutional responsibilities and mechanisms of international cooperation. In this sense, the Summit can be understood as producing social development as a governable field anchored in state-led political authority and formalised commitments.

The structure of the Copenhagen Programme of Action further reinforced this mode of governance. Its detailed commitments, targets and recommended actions reflected a belief in the capacity of coordinated political will to address social challenges through structured intervention (UN, 1995a). Social development was thus framed as an object that could be governed through clearly defined commitments, supported by national implementation strategies and international cooperation. The emphasis on political leadership at the highest level of state representation underscored the centrality of sovereign authority in this configuration.

The convening of the Second World Summit for Social Development in Doha in 2025 takes place within a markedly different geopolitical and institutional context. The decision by the United Nations General Assembly (2025) to organise the Summit reflects a recognition of persistent implementation gaps and the need to renew momentum in the light of ongoing global challenges, including deepening inequalities, demographic transformations, and rapid technological and environmental change. However, the trajectory leading to Doha is not characterised by a singular moment of mobilisation comparable to Copenhagen. Rather, it emerges through a series of interrelated processes that have progressively reconstituted social development within a broader and more complex global policy architecture.

Central among these processes is the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, which integrates social development into a comprehensive set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UN General Assembly, 2015). Unlike the relatively bounded focus of the Copenhagen commitments, the 2030 Agenda embeds social development within a universal and multidimensional architecture that encompasses economic, environmental and institutional dimensions. This integration expands the scope of social development, but also diffuses its boundaries, as it becomes one component within a wider constellation of global priorities. Subsequent milestones, including the 2023 SDG Summit and the 2024 Summit of the Future, further reinforce this trajectory, emphasising issues such as digital transformation, global governance reform and intergenerational responsibility (UN, 2023, 2024).

From this perspective, the 'road to Doha' is not a linear continuation of the Copenhagen process, but a gradual reconstitution of the field of social development through overlapping agendas and institutional processes. Social development is no longer formulated primarily through a dedicated summit with a clearly defined Programme of Action, but is instead continuously redefined across multiple platforms, each contributing to its evolving meaning. This shift from singular moments of normative consolidation towards more iterative and dispersed forms of policy development reflects a transformation in how global governance operates (Chatterton et al., 2012; Pattberg & Widerberg, 2017; Peel et al., 2012).

This transformation is also evident in the language and structure of the Doha Declaration. While it reaffirms the central themes of poverty eradication, decent work and social inclusion, it does so within a discursive formulation that emphasises alignment, integration and partnership (UN General Assembly, 2025). Rather than introducing a new and comprehensive set of commitments comparable to those expressed in Copenhagen, the Doha Declaration situates itself within an already dense landscape of global agreements, seeking to reinforce and connect existing policy architectures. Social development is thus framed less as a discrete policy domain requiring new commitments, and more as a cross-cutting concern that must be integrated across multiple areas of governance (Zelenev et al., 2025).

This shift has important implications for how social development is constructed as an object of governance. Whereas Copenhagen was grounded in clearly defined commitments and a relatively stable set of priorities, Doha operates through processes of coordination, alignment and continuous adaptation. Governance, in this context, shifts from the formulation of new commitments to the management of complexity across overlapping agendas. This does not imply a weakening of social development as a priority, but it does signal a transformation in how it is pursued and institutionalised.

At the same time, the expansion of the social development agenda introduces new tensions. The incorporation of issues such as technological change, environmental sustainability and demographic shifts broadens the scope of social development, while contributing to increasingly complex, multi-level and multi-actor forms of governance (Pattberg & Widerberg, 2017; Sørensen & Torfing, 2022). As social development becomes increasingly embedded within a wide range of policy domains, its distinctiveness as a political project becomes less clearly defined. The emphasis on integration and alignment, while enabling more holistic

approaches, may also obscure the specific social objectives that were more explicitly articulated in Copenhagen.

A further point of contrast lies in the level and form of political engagement. While the Doha Summit was convened at the level of Heads of State or Government, the actual participation at this level was significantly lower than in 1995, with 41 heads compared to 117 in Copenhagen (UN, 1995b, 2025). This apparent decline in high-level representation should not be read simply as a reduction in political commitment. Rather, it reflects a redistribution of governance across a more heterogeneous set of actors.

This redistribution is reflected in the framing of the Doha Summit as a multi-stakeholder platform, explicitly involving international organisations, civil society, academic institutions and the private sector alongside state actors (UN, 2025). Social development is no longer constructed primarily as an object of intergovernmental negotiation, but as a field requiring coordinated action across multiple levels and sectors. Authority becomes more dispersed, with different actors contributing to agenda-setting, knowledge production and implementation.

Taken together, these developments indicate that social development has undergone a significant transformation since 1995. While its core normative foundations remain relatively stable, the conditions under which it is governed, the actors involved and the forms of authority through which it is enacted have shifted. The transition from Copenhagen to Doha is therefore not adequately captured by narratives of continuity or decline. Rather, it reflects a transformation in global governance, in which social development is increasingly constituted through distributed, multi-actor arrangements that expand participation, while introducing new forms of complexity, negotiation and contestation.

At the same time, this transformation raises a more critical question that cannot be resolved descriptively. If Copenhagen represented a moment of concentrated political commitment, Doha reflects a more diffuse and networked configuration of governance. Whether this shift should be understood as a strengthening of social development through broader inclusion, or as a weakening through the dilution of political accountability, remains an open question. It may also be read as a process of depoliticisation, in which social development is reframed less as a matter of political commitment and more as a technical and coordinative challenge. In this sense, Doha is not simply different from Copenhagen; it marks a shift in which the political, the technical and the epistemic are rearranged in ways that both enable and constrain the pursuit of social development.

THE AMBIVALENT INCORPORATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY

One of the most visible shifts between the World Summit for Social Development in 1995 and its successor in Doha in 2025 lies in the expanded presence of civil society actors within the formal architecture of the summit. While civil society organisations were present in Copenhagen, their role remained largely peripheral to the intergovernmental negotiations that defined the summit's outcomes (Bäckstrand, 2006). In contrast, the Doha Summit was explicitly framed as a multi-stakeholder platform, bringing together not only governments but also non-governmental organisations, professional associations, academic institutions and representatives of the private sector (UN, 2025). This expansion of participation suggests, at

least at the level of formal inclusion, a broadening of the field of actors recognised as relevant to social development (Bäckstrand & Söderbaum, 2018; Junior & Luciano, 2021; Scholte, 2004).

Such developments reflect a wider transformation in global governance in which the production and implementation of social policy increasingly involve actors beyond the state (Larner, 2004). Civil society, in this context, is often positioned as a carrier of local knowledge, a representative of marginalised voices, and a partner in the co-production of solutions (Hill et al., 2020; Lokot & Wake, 2021). The visibility of civil society within the Doha Summit can therefore be read as part of an effort to align global social development with more participatory and inclusive forms of governance, consistent with broader discourses around the Sustainable Development Goals and the principle of leaving no one behind.

However, the incorporation of civil society into formal summit structures does not entail a corresponding redistribution of decision-making power. Rather than displacing intergovernmental authority, participation is organised through carefully structured formats, including consultations, side events and parallel forums, which operate alongside, rather than within, the core processes of negotiation. These modalities of inclusion operate as technologies of governance (Dean, 2010) that render civil society both visible and manageable, enabling its contributions to be acknowledged, while delimiting the extent to which it can shape outcomes. Civil society participation, in this sense, functions less as a transfer of power than as a regulated form of engagement within pre-defined institutional parameters.

From this perspective, the increased presence of civil society does not simply reflect a democratisation of global governance, but also the emergence of new forms of regulation and control. By defining the terms under which participation takes place, institutional and discursive formations establish boundaries around what can be said, who can speak and how contributions are rendered into policy (Fleck, 1935, 1979). Civil society actors are thus incorporated into a policy arena that is already constituted by existing priorities, categories and modes of reasoning. Participation becomes a condition of visibility, but not necessarily of influence (Carvalho et al., 2019).

A further layer of complexity emerges when distinguishing between different forms of civil society participation. Not all civil society actors occupy the same position within global governance processes. Institutionalised organisations, including large international NGOs, professional associations and established transnational networks are more likely to gain access to formal mechanisms of participation because they possess recognised expertise, organisational capacity and familiarity with institutional procedures (Tallberg et al., 2018). Their engagement is often characterised by alignment with existing policy agendas and the ability to operate within established discursive and procedural norms. In this sense, they function as “institutional civil society networks” (Fouksman, 2017, p. 1850), engaging in forms of participation that are enabled, recognised and constrained by existing governance structures. This positioning affords visibility and access, but also creates incentives for alignment, potentially privileging actors whose knowledge and practices are already compatible with dominant governance paradigms.

In contrast, more grassroots, critical or loosely organised actors often operate at the margins of these formal structures (Campos et al., 2022). Their ways of engaging may fit less easily within formal institutional structures, and their perspectives may challenge dominant understandings more directly. This distinction does not imply a clear separation between the two, as actors frequently move between these positions. However, it highlights that civil society is not a homogeneous category, but a differentiated field in which access, visibility, and influence are unevenly distributed (Campos et al., 2022).

The emergence of initiatives such as the People's Charter for a New Eco-Social World (Global Summit, 2022) further illustrates this differentiation. The Charter may be understood as a counter-discursive intervention (Jäger & Maier, 2010) that seeks to foreground alternative visions of social development beyond the parameters of institutionalised participation. Rather than operating within the formal structures of the United Nations, it constructs a parallel space in which different priorities, narratives and demands can be expressed. In doing so, it challenges the assumption that inclusion within existing governance regimes is sufficient to ensure meaningful influence.

As a counter-discourse, the People's Charter does not simply add another voice to the existing conversation, but seeks to reframe the terms of that conversation. It foregrounds issues and perspectives that may be marginalised within official declarations, and it questions the adequacy of existing institutional arrangements in addressing structural inequalities and injustices. At the same time, its position outside formal processes limits its direct influence on negotiated outcomes, illustrating the tension between autonomy and impact that characterises many forms of critical civil society engagement.

The relationship between institutionalised and critical forms of civil society is therefore not one of opposition, but of coexistence within a broader field of power relations. Institutional civil society actors may gain access and influence by aligning with dominant rationalities, but in doing so may also contribute to reproducing prevailing modes of governance. This raises the question of who benefits from such configurations. Participation may enhance the legitimacy of governance processes by demonstrating inclusivity, while simultaneously filtering out forms of critique that cannot be easily translated into policy-relevant language. In this sense, institutional civil society risks functioning as a mechanism through which critique is moderated and rendered compatible with existing agendas (Zanoni, 2020).

Alternative or oppositional perspectives may remain structurally constrained by the dominant 'thought style' through which participation and legitimacy are organised (Fleck, 1979, p. 2ff). Their marginality is not merely incidental, but reflects the limits of institutionalised participation in accommodating more disruptive forms of critique (Fleck, 1979). Together, these dynamics suggest that civil society participation operates as a form of governed participation rather than unqualified emancipation. Inclusion expands the field of actors, but also redefines the terms under which critique can be expressed and recognised.

It is against this backdrop that the role of civil society in the Doha Summit can be understood as fundamentally ambivalent. On the one hand, its increased visibility signals a recognition of the importance of diverse actors in addressing complex social challenges. On the other hand,

the modalities through which this participation is organised limit the extent to which civil society can fundamentally reshape the terms of global social development. Inclusion, in this sense, does not dissolve existing hierarchies of authority, but reconfigures them in more diffuse and less immediately visible forms.

This suggests that the expansion of civil society participation should not be interpreted uncritically as evidence of more democratic or equitable governance. Rather, it points to a transformation in how governance is enacted, in which the incorporation of additional actors coexists with the persistence of structural asymmetries. Civil society is thus neither external to global social development governance nor fully integrated within it, but occupies an intermediate position characterised by both opportunity and constraint.

SOCIAL WORK AND THE PRODUCTION OF GLOBAL SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT KNOWLEDGE

While the expanded participation of civil society reflects a broader redistribution of actors within global social development, the position of social work within this evolving landscape requires more specific consideration. Historically, social work has occupied an ambivalent position within broader policy and governance arenas. Despite its longstanding engagement with poverty, inequality and social exclusion, its forms of knowledge have often remained secondary to dominant economic and political forms of expertise (Göppner, 2017; Schmocker, 2006; Thiersch, 2008). This marginality is not simply institutional, but epistemic. It reflects a hierarchy of knowledge in which certain forms of expertise, particularly those associated with economics, quantification and technical policy design have been privileged over practice-based and relational forms of understanding (Dean, 2010).

The increasing visibility of organisations such as IFSW within United Nations processes, including the Doha Summit, signals a partial transformation of this position. Through sustained engagement with global governance structures, social work has begun to assert itself not only as a professional field of practice, but also as a source of knowledge and normative orientation in relation to social development (Staub-Bernasconi, 2011). This shift is evident in the codification of global ethical principles (Sewpaul & Henrickson, 2019), the institutionalisation of rights-based approaches within social work practice (McPherson & Abell, 2020), and the growing recognition of lived experience as a legitimate basis for understanding social issues (Casey, 2023). However, this growing presence should not be interpreted simply as inclusion. It also reflects a more contested process in which different forms of knowledge compete for recognition and authority.

From a governmentality perspective, this development forms part of the broader process through which social development is made governable. Governance operates not only through institutions and policies, but through the generation of knowledge that renders social phenomena intelligible and actionable (Dean, 2010; Rudin, 2020). In this sense, social work contributes to shaping the categories, problem definitions and intervention logics through which social development is interpreted and governed. Its practice-based knowledge, grounded in engagement with individuals, families and communities, introduces particular ways of knowing that foreground relationality, context and ethical judgement (Payne, 2021).

At the same time, the incorporation of social work into global policy processes brings it into direct confrontation with dominant technocratic forms of knowledge that structure contemporary governance (Quiroga-Villamarín & Mansouri, 2025). These include economic modelling, statistical indicators and forms of evidence associated with the paradigm of evidence-based policy (Dean, 2010). Such approaches privilege standardisation, comparability and measurability, often positioning quantitative data and experimental methods as the most authoritative basis for decision-making. Within this context, knowledge is valued to the extent that it can be translated into indicators, benchmarks, and scalable interventions (Dean, 2010).

By contrast, social work knowledge is often relational, context-sensitive and grounded in lived experience (Thiersch, 2008; Thompson & Wadley, 2016). It is produced through practice encounters, ethical reflection and engagement with the complexities of everyday life, dimensions that do not easily lend themselves to quantification or standardisation. This establishes not merely a tension, but a struggle between competing epistemic logics: one oriented towards abstraction, generalisation and control, and the other towards situated understanding, relationality and responsiveness. The increasing prominence of evidence-based governance (Wike et al., 2014) therefore does not simply create opportunities for social work to contribute, but structures the conditions under which its knowledge is recognised, translated and, at times, marginalised.

In this sense, social work is not only entering global policy arenas as an additional voice. It is engaging in a struggle over the authority to define legitimate knowledge, in which different actors seek to determine what counts as valid knowledge, what constitutes a social problem, and which forms of intervention are considered legitimate (Rudin, 2020). The inclusion of social work does not displace dominant knowledge regimes, but places it in direct competition with them. Its contributions must be negotiated within a field in which technocratic, economic and indicator-driven forms of knowledge continue to hold considerable authority.

This dynamic becomes particularly visible in the ways in which social work engages with global policy agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals. While such initiatives provide important entry points for advocacy and alignment, they also require translation into a language of targets, indicators and measurable outcomes. In this process, aspects of social work knowledge that can be quantified or standardised may gain prominence, while others, particularly those related to lived experience, relational practice and ethical judgement, risk being marginalised (Mackay, 2023). Social work does not enter a neutral space of inclusion, but a structured epistemic field in which recognition depends on the ability to conform, at least partially, to dominant modes of knowledge production.

A concrete illustration of this dynamic can be found in the contributions of IASSW, ICSD, ICSW and IFSW to the Doha Summit, particularly through their concept papers and interventions in thematic sessions. For example, the emphasis on integrated social policies (Zelenev et al., 2025) and intergenerational solidarity (Rudin et al., 2025) foregrounds relational and life-course perspectives that challenge more segmented and technocratic approaches to policy design. Rather than treating social issues as isolated and measurable problems, these contributions view them as interconnected processes shaped by social relations

and institutional contexts. In doing so, they offer alternative understandings that cannot easily be reduced to technical solutions.

However, the capacity of such perspectives to influence global agendas is mediated by the institutional and discursive contexts in which they are framed (Inda, 2005b). As social work knowledge is translated into formats that are legible within policy processes, for instance, concept notes, policy briefs or formal interventions, it undergoes processes of adaptation that may reshape its content and emphasis. This translation is not neutral. It reflects the pressures exerted by dominant knowledge regimes, which privilege certain forms of narration while marginalising others. Social work therefore operates within a field of negotiation in which its epistemic contributions are both enabled and constrained (Inda, 2005b).

This points to a broader process of epistemic contestation within the field of global social development. Different forms of expertise, economic, technical, professional and experiential coexist and compete, each seeking to define what counts as valid knowledge and appropriate intervention (Moore, 2020). Social work, in this context, does not simply seek recognition. It participates in an ongoing struggle over the terms through which social development is understood and governed. Its emphasis on "social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities" (IASSW & IFSW, 2014) constitutes not only a normative position, but an epistemic intervention that challenges dominant framings of social problems.

The role of IFSW in the context of the Doha Summit illustrates this dual positioning. As a recognised partner within the broader ecosystem of actors contributing to social development, IFSW participates in the production and dissemination of knowledge that informs global discussions. At the same time, its influence is shaped by the need to engage with established policy agendas and discursive conventions. The capacity of social work to shape global agendas therefore depends not only on its presence, but on its ability to navigate and contest the epistemic conditions under which knowledge is recognised.

Importantly, social work does not merely respond to existing problem definitions, but actively participates in their construction (Schmocker, 2006). By framing issues in terms of rights, dignity and social justice, it contributes to defining what counts as a social problem and what constitutes an appropriate response (Staub-Bernasconi, 2017). In doing so, it engages in processes of boundary-making that delineate the scope of social development and the responsibilities of different actors. This underscores the inseparability of knowledge and power, as the ability to define problems is closely linked to the capacity to shape interventions.

The increasing engagement of social work within global governance thus signals not only a shift in institutional positioning, but a transformation in the epistemic landscape of social development. As new actors contribute to the production of knowledge, the field becomes more plural, but also more contested. Whether social work's distinctive forms of knowledge can retain their critical and relational character within this environment depends on how these epistemic struggles are negotiated in practice.

Social work therefore occupies a position that is neither external to nor fully integrated within the production of global social development knowledge. Rather, it operates within a network

of power and knowledge relations in which its contributions are both shaped by and capable of influencing the terms of debate. This positioning underscores the importance of critically examining not only the presence of social work in global arenas, but also the conditions under which its knowledge is produced, recognised and mobilised.

RECONFIGURING AUTHORITY: THE FOUR-PARTNER COLLABORATION AS EPISTEMIC PRACTICE

The Second World Summit for Social Development in Doha marked a visible intensification of collaboration between four major global actors in the field: IASSW, ICSW, ICSD and IFSW. While cooperation between these organisations is not new, the Summit represented a more structured and coordinated form of engagement in which the partners worked jointly across a set of shared interventions rather than operating in parallel. As reflected in the ICSD reporting, this was experienced as a 'historic partnership' and a 'new experience' in navigating multilateral processes collectively, with the explicit aim of making civil society voices more visible and effective in global forums (ICSD, 2025, p. 2).

Empirically, this collaboration was organised around three jointly supported side-event panels, complemented by a coordinated roundtable intervention and additional cross-participation in related sessions. Rather than each organisation leading isolated events, the partners worked across all three panels, contributing speakers, shaping concept notes and aligning messaging. In addition, they jointly prepared and submitted a statement for a formal roundtable session, recognising the highly selective nature of floor interventions within formal UN procedures and the strategic advantage of coordinated submissions. This combination of joint panels and a shared intervention reflect a deliberate strategy of coordinated knowledge production and representation.

The first panel, 'Strengthening Social Integration through Intergenerational Solidarity' (Rudin et al., 2025), foregrounded social integration as a relational and practice-based process. The concept note emphasised that contemporary challenges such as demographic change, inequality, climate pressures, and declining social trust cannot be addressed by isolated policy domains or age groups, but require sustained cooperation across generations (Rudin et al., 2025). The session highlighted how intergenerational approaches can move beyond policy silos by fostering reciprocal relationships, shared responsibility, and community-level resilience. Empirical examples presented in the session included co-located services, mentorship initiatives, and digital platforms connecting different age groups, illustrating how social integration can be operationalised through everyday practices rather than abstract policy targets. Social workers were explicitly positioned as key facilitators in translating these relational approaches into practice.

The second panel, 'Designing Integrated Social Policies for Inclusive and Sustainable Development' (Zelenev et al., 2025), shifted the analytical lens towards institutional and systemic coordination. Here, fragmentation across sectors such as social protection, health, education, labour and community services was identified as a central barrier to effective social development. The concept note highlighted the need to move beyond siloed approaches and to recognise social policy as both a moral imperative and a strategic driver of inclusive

development (Zelenev et al., 2025). Contributions drew on international case studies, including examples from Costa Rica, Finland, Spain and New Zealand, to demonstrate how integrated approaches can align policy, programme, and administrative levels. The panel concluded by highlighting that effective integration depends on coordination mechanisms, shared data systems, and strong frontline engagement, with social workers playing a critical role in linking policy architectures to lived realities (ICSD, 2025).

The third panel, "Universal Social Protection as a Pillar of Just Societies" (Healy et al., 2025), conceptualised social development through a rights-based and redistributive perspective. The session emphasised that universal social protection is essential not only for poverty reduction, but for ensuring dignity, reducing inequality and strengthening social cohesion. It challenged fragmented and means-tested approaches, arguing instead for comprehensive systems grounded in solidarity and universalism (Healy et al., 2025). At the same time, the panel addressed persistent structural challenges, including weak institutional coordination, limited financing, and the risk of technocratic solutions that remain disconnected from broader social justice goals. Discussions highlighted the need to integrate social care within protection systems and to link global commitments with local implementation.

Across these three panels, a fourth, cross-cutting thematic strand emerged through joint participation in additional sessions, including those on financing for a just transition and linking global commitments to local impact. These contributions highlighted the structural constraints shaping the implementation of social development agendas, including unequal global financing arrangements, debt burdens, and gaps between policy commitments and lived realities. These sessions emphasised the need for stronger research–policy linkages, cross-sector collaboration, and context-sensitive strategies to translate high-level global agendas into tangible outcomes (ICSD, 2025).

Taken together, the three panels, supported collectively by the four organisations, do not represent isolated thematic contributions, but a coordinated epistemic intervention through which social development is actively framed, structured and rendered governable. They advance a coherent framing of social development as relational, integrated, rights-based and context-sensitive, while mobilising different forms of knowledge, including practice-based insights, policy analysis and normative argumentation. The collaborative structure ensured that each organisation contributed across panels, reinforcing alignment while allowing for thematic differentiation.

The coordinated roundtable intervention (Lombard et al., 2025) further exemplifies this epistemic practice. The four organisations jointly developed and submitted a statement addressing progress and gaps in the implementation of the Copenhagen Declaration (UN, 1995a) and the 2030 Agenda (UN General Assembly, 2015). The process of drafting the statement involved integrating inputs from all partners and aligning the message with the thematic priorities of the Summit (ICSD, 2025). The content emphasised the need for integrated and effective social policy, smarter public spending, investment in the social and care sectors, and stronger alignment between social, economic and environmental policies. By submitting a joint statement, the partners enacted a collective voice that was strategically designed to increase the likelihood of being heard within a highly constrained procedural space.

From an analytical perspective, this collaboration can be understood as an epistemic practice through which authority is produced and enacted (Quiroga-Villamarín & Mansouri, 2025). It is not only a matter of organisational coordination, but of collectively shaping how social development is defined, what problems are prioritised, and which forms of knowledge are mobilised as legitimate (Dean, 2010). The ICSD newsletter explicitly frames this collaboration as essential for "making our voices heard in multilateral forums" and highlights the importance of "working together" and "having one voice" in influencing global processes (ICSD, 2025, pp. 2–4). In this sense, coordination becomes a mechanism for amplifying authority within knowledge-production processes in a crowded and competitive governance environment.

At the same time, this process reflects a partial consolidation of epistemic power within civil society itself. This raises a normative question of representation, namely whether coordinated visibility also narrows the range of perspectives that become legible within multilateral processes. The ability to coordinate across organisations, develop joint interventions and navigate UN procedures is unevenly distributed. While the collaboration enhances visibility and influence, it may also privilege actors with established institutional capacity and global reach. Smaller or less formalised organisations, as well as more critical or grassroots perspectives, may find it more difficult to access similar platforms or to be incorporated into coordinated interventions (Campos et al., 2022).

The coexistence of this structured collaboration with broader civil society processes, such as the People's Charter, further illustrates this ambivalence. While the four-partner collaboration operates within and alongside formal governance structures, other spaces provide opportunities for more open and potentially more critical forms of engagement. Together, these dynamics highlight that civil society participation is not homogeneous, but differentiated and structured through varying degrees of access, coordination and recognition.

The significance of the four-partner collaboration therefore lies not only in its immediate contributions to the Doha Summit, but in what it reveals about the evolving nature of global social development governance. It reflects a shift towards more coordinated, strategic and epistemically organised forms of civil society engagement. At the same time, it raises important questions about representation, inclusion and the way that legitimacy and visibility are distributed among different forms of knowledge within civil society itself.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A PLURAL AND CONTESTED SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT ORDER

This paper has examined the Second World Summit for Social Development in Doha not as a singular event, but as a site in which broader transformations in the governance of social development become visible. By placing the Doha Summit in relation to the Copenhagen Declaration of 1995, it has been possible to trace both continuity and change in how social development is articulated, institutionalised and enacted within the global arena.

While the core normative commitments of poverty eradication, decent work and social integration remain formally intact, the analysis has shown that the conditions under which these commitments are pursued have shifted significantly. The movement from a state-centred model towards more distributed and multi-actor forms of governance reflects not a simple decline in

political commitment, but a redistribution of authority across a more complex and heterogeneous field. This shift is characterised by the expansion of participation alongside the persistence of structural asymmetries, and by the increasing centrality of knowledge production in shaping governance processes.

For social work, these developments are not peripheral. They directly affect how the profession can engage with, influence and respond to global social development agendas. The growing presence of social work actors within global governance creates new opportunities to bring practice-based knowledge, ethical commitments and lived experience into international policy processes. At the same time, these opportunities are conditioned by the need to operate within institutional and epistemic arrangements that privilege particular forms of knowledge, especially those that are standardised, measurable and aligned with existing policy architectures (Dean, 2010). The challenge is therefore not only to gain access to these spaces, but to engage critically with the conditions under which knowledge is recognised and translated.

The analysis of the four-partner collaboration illustrates both the potential and the limits of this engagement. By coordinating their contributions, social work and social development actors have enhanced their visibility and influence within global processes, demonstrating the capacity to shape agendas through collective action. Yet this coordination also reflects a consolidation of epistemic authority that may privilege certain voices over others, raising questions about representation, inclusion and internal hierarchies within civil society. The ability to speak with one voice (ICSD, 2025) strengthens influence, but also requires ongoing reflection on whose knowledge is being amplified and whose may remain marginal.

These dynamics point to a more fundamental shift in the nature of global social development governance. If Copenhagen represented a moment of concentrated political commitment, Doha reflects a configuration in which governance increasingly operates through coordination, alignment and the relational formation of knowledge. In this context, social development risks being reframed less as a contested political project concerned with redistribution and justice, and more as a technical and managerial challenge. This potential depoliticisation does not eliminate conflict or inequality, but may render them less visible within formal governance processes.

For social work practitioners, this implies the need to engage with global governance regimes not only as instruments for implementation, but as sites of negotiation in which the meaning of social development itself is shaped. Practice-based knowledge, relational approaches and attention to lived experience remain critical resources, but their influence depends on how they are mobilised and positioned within dominant policy discourses. For social work scholars, the findings highlight the importance of examining not only who participates in global governance, but how knowledge is produced, recognised and contested within these processes.

Looking ahead, the continued institutionalisation of multi-actor governance is likely to further expand the role of professional and civil society actors in shaping global agendas. Whether this leads to more inclusive and context-sensitive forms of social development, or to more complex forms of managed participation, remains an open question. What is clear, however, is that the

future of social development will be shaped not only by political commitments, but by ongoing struggles over knowledge, authority, and the terms through which social problems are defined and addressed.

In this evolving landscape, the role of social work is not only to participate, but to critically and strategically shape the epistemic conditions of global social development. This requires maintaining the profession's commitment to relational, context-sensitive, and justice-oriented approaches, while actively engaging with the structures through which global governance operates. The challenge is therefore not simply one of inclusion, but of influence. This requires not only participation in existing governance structures, but active engagement in shaping the epistemic foundations through which social development is defined and governed. If social development is increasingly governed through struggles over knowledge, coordination and legitimacy, social work must position itself not as a peripheral participant, but as an active agent in advancing the eco-social and justice-oriented visions of social development articulated throughout this paper.

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