

## **Episode 164 - Dr. Richard Smith: A Social Worker's Report from the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development**

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work the podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.insocialwork.org](http://www.insocialwork.org). We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice research. We educate we connect. We care. We are in social work high from Buffalo. Right now we're celebrating and enjoying life here UB and across western New York as the Eubie men's basketball team qualified for the NCAA March Madness basketball tournament its first ever trip to the big dance. I'm Peter Sobota. In this episode our guest Dr Richard Smith discusses his attendance and experiences at the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro Brazil and comments on the implications for social work practice. Dr. Smith begins by defining social development and its role in eradicating poverty in communities. He goes on to describe the goals of the conference as well as his observations while in Rio de Janeiro he concludes with discussion and recommendations on how to combine social work practice and principles of sustainable development. Dr. Richard Smith Ph.D. MSW is assistant professor at Wayne State University's School of Social Work. His research interests include sustainable community development and equality and migration. His previous experience includes serving in the Peace Corps in Mongolia and consulting work with UNICEF and the World Bank. Dr. Smith was interviewed by our own Dr. Shaanta Murshid assistant professor at the UB School of Social Work. Dr Smith was interviewed in November of 2014 Dr. Smith welcome to the School of Social Work.

[00:02:09] I am Shaanta Murshid and I will be talking to you about sustainable development. So when we think about sustainability we think about how we can perhaps intergenerational transmit resources social economic environmental. But could you tell us how you define sustainable development and really why should social workers be concerned about this. That's a great question and I'm very happy to be on this podcast as a starting point. I would start with but and with the Brundtland definition of sustainable development. And this came out of a United Nations report in 1987 and the metaphor they used was the three legged stool of sustainability one leg being the economy one being the environment and one being society the social or community. And that's the part where that third part society that's the part that social work would be most obviously aligned on at administrative level as the UN is structured and many national government or member states are structured you will have a Environment Ministry. You will have a Social Development Ministry and for those like me who are from the United States other countries call this entity a social development ministry that's what the UN calls it. We generally call these Health and Human Services ministries or social service departments but that would be the word used internationally as is what the profession of social work is called internationally. Now they also have finance ministers or Treasury ministers as in our case and it was a way of showing that how these three values also functions of government could need to collaborate to ensure sustainability. And what does that mean.

[00:04:00] It means that as you said future generations are not compromised by the decisions we make today. So going forward several generations individuals families communities will still be able to have levels of wellbeing that's not compromised by our lack of foresight by using non-renewable resources or even managing fiscal resources in a way that does not provide a future for our children. Now the reason I said it doesn't have to end there. I think there are different criticisms of what's missing. Why is it only three legs not four and different scholars will propose various fourth stools of a leg. One of my colleagues here is interested in a cultural pillar. What's your pillar. I have mostly been focusing on within the social thinking about community participation that in

between the economic and the social. Really thinking about poverty and inequality in the context of place because I believe that place matters and that place in the world. Yeah. That's a good question because yes I did mean place in geography there are privileged places there are places that do not have the resources that others do and that interacts with other social identities of race class gender sexual orientation. So those are probably my two focal points of my research place poverty and then because of the inequality places that creates push and pull factors for migration yes people moving to jobs people leaving sites where there were natural disasters just like your work with disaster relief in Bangladesh. Well moving on a little bit you attended the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development. You know what I'm interested in knowing is what did you see there. And more importantly what did you hear.

[00:06:04] Can you tell us about some of that and some anecdotes about your experiences there and what you thought and perhaps a critique of what you heard and how you think social workers could benefit or not benefit from some of that. That's a great question. I think that we were reading the press the whole time and a lot of the U.S. based press was vilifying the conference and there might be good reasons to do that. But first the context I mentioned earlier the Brundtland that laid a bit of the foundation. The conference I went to was also called Rio Plus 20 because 20 years prior was the original Rio UN Conference on Sustainable Development and three treaties came out of that. And as far as I know one of the backdrops was what are we doing with our environmental treaties. These were treaties relate to climate change species loss. And it was to follow up the United Nations as the system likes to follow up on all the treaties and conventions and documents that and they do this by having a conference. This conference was held as they say in U.N. speak at the highest level. That means that even though it was an environmental conference and typically that the main audience would be then the environmental ministers and for our case that was the head of the EPA heads of state were invited. Unfortunately the Queen of England was having her birthday party that week. So we did get a lot of heads of state. It was like a jubilee birthday so you know that is important. So that was the purpose. Now planning for this conference started way in advance more than a year.

[00:07:44] So we had Ben we meaning eco city builders that was the non-governmental organization that whose delegation I was part of we had been looking at the quote unquote zero draft. So the document was coming out. We knew it was not going to be a treaty. The reason we knew it would not be a treaty was because there wasn't political will among the member states to have another treaty because the feeling was we didn't want another Copenhagen just two years prior to that there had been a conference in Copenhagen to attempt to have another round at a climate change treaty and that did not come out with the treaty. So the goal in this draft was to affirm existing treaties and to in some level brainstorm climate adaptation. There was a pessimism that member states would not do anything to address climate change. So what was our second best solution. Some other issues that we're trying to be addressed as the Organization of the U.N. system the environment. One is to restructure how the agencies are structured so that the environmental agency would have a higher position within the UN system. One ask was that agency would be able to send letters to member states on the degree to which they were in compliance with existing treaties. And then finally the major outcome was to integrate the Millennium Development Goals was a document that originated out of the social ministers in the 1995 conference on social development. It was to take that document that was scheduled to end in 2015 and have a new era called the Sustainable Development Goals. So intervening developed mangoes will become the Sustainable Development correct.

[00:09:41] Beginning next year we will have the Millennium Development Goals we will have a document and a website for that matter called the Sustainable Development Goals with the understanding that it would include if not all the majority of the Millennium Development Goals and especially poverty especially the goals that exist currently regarding the environment. Access to water access to sanitation. And that happened. We will be starting the Sustainable Development

Goals next year. Why does that matter for social workers wealth for the last 15 years almost all countries reported through their social ministries on the Millennium Development Goals and that set a framework for nation state policy that is sometimes invisible to social workers in the United States because of our conflicted relationship with the United Nations. But it's not trivial. Our U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports on those goals and that affects how they manage child welfare systems how they manage Medicare Medicaid and now that's internationally will be coordinated with the environmental ministers. How often at the local level have social workers sat with their you know the county social worker sat with the county waste management personnel or the environmental compliance personnel we might begin to see that happening because it's happening at the international level. So that was the background. Now what did I see. Rio de Janeiro is an incredible city and it was a great backdrop for a conference on the environment. The first event I went to was the legendary Copacabana Beach. And this was my worryin station that was at a museum and that was when we went over all the background and received some orientation.

[00:11:38] Even though Rio de Janeiro it is a city larger than any we have in the United States. It's one of the largest cities in the world. But the conference had over 20000 delegates and it felt like we took over the whole city. Even though we were just a fraction of the people there security was paramount when we registered with the United Nations. They got the address of all our hotels and the government of Brazil stationed an army officer at the corner of every hotel even if we were staying in a humble Pennsy only in the hills and they still they had armed guards in front of our Siani. That's why I call that a hostel in the United States. It's a little nicer. Used to be an old convent and that's why I called the Pennsy only that's the Portuguese name. So most people stayed downtown and the convention center was two hours away by bus. It was the site that will also be sight to the Olympics. And it wasn't there panting for that. Yeah and it's a very mammoth convention and sports complex with stadiums. Convention Center and the whole convention center was surrounded with security so the security check in was larger than any airport I'd bet and we had the lines and the scanners as you can imagine. Is there a same kind of uproar that we saw in Brazil or the World Cup. Yes. Let me get to that when I was there for a full two weeks so I was there for the preparatory conference. So the preparatory conference as you imagine it was a time for delegates from the member states to make final changes to this document.

[00:13:23] The title of that document was the future we want and it was also a chance for people from the non-governmental community namely me us. We had panel discussions. We had planning meetings. We also had side events all over the city and we could go in and watch the delegates debate the draft and that had never been done before. It was the first UN Conference where that was allowed. Now the main conference was when the heads of state environmental minister came. President Obama did not come. Joseph Biden didn't come. Secretary of State Clinton came and Lisa Johnston EPA administrator came and we did a panel with the State Department. I was not in attendance at the one with Hillary Clinton unfortunately because she came on the last day and I was gone by then. But the main conference was what we were and that was when the highest ranking official from the member state delivers the speech affirming the document that had been produced now but between these two events. Brazil asked to do something rather extraordinary that also had not been done before. They had a four day event called Dialogue days and they want it to be open to the general public free of charge. So anyone who could get there anywhere in the world could go into the conference facility and have a structured dialogue and to prepare that they had a web competition. Anyone on the planet with access to the Internet could propose a sustainability solution to be debated at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development and the crowdsourcing ideas. Yeah this was the first crowdsourced UN conference. Very nice. And did you see a lot of participation. Oh it was incredible.

[00:15:20] So the ideas were arranged into themes and so I attended the one sustainable

employment and I attended the one on sustainable cities. The main floor they had room for I think 2000 people and it was fairly packed. That's good to hear. Yeah. Now when we got it we weren't sure what to expect. Our delegation had proposed that dialogue days should affirm a global system for sustainable cities. And our idea had gotten into the top 10 and we'd been working for about five years developing a framework with 15 categories of sustainability both social environmental financial. There was a panel discussion of experts and then about 30 minutes for open for debate and then the people on the floor got to vote for their favorite and then that would be put into the record the favor of the audience. And then the favor of the panel was also entered into the record. Did he go as part of eco city when he said that was the builders okay. Yeah it would like to know a little more about that to finish up first. Yeah Eco City Builders is a non-governmental organization based in Oakland California that does both advocacy education and planning for sustainability and cities and an eco city is a city in balance with nature. I see how do you believe that. SIMON Yeah no question. There are key principles. One is access by proximity.

[00:16:58] People should be able to get where they need to go preferably by foot but maybe by a non motorized transportation bike or a low impact transportation that there's access to nature should be able to walk out your door and see where you go if you're in the desert. Maybe it isn't green but you know you should be able to interact with plants wildlife leave the city and the environment of the city should support views of nature not try to hide them. And there's more. But we've been working on a framework so that the city wants to be certified as an eco city that what would that look like. What would that mean for the people for educational systems for healthcare. And our idea was not voted by popular vote in part because one of the experts was from the city of Mazar which is a built eco city. And she raised a very good point that it's hard to come up with a system that fits for every country every continent every city because deserts are very different than tropical rainforest very different Arctic areas. But other panelists actually elected that as their favorite. So we did you know I think it was good because we were able to have a discussion about the substantive issue. I will say the people voted for recycling they voted in a recycling idea as sort of a core component of a sustainable city. Nancy that's something that people are doing already so it's not like rooting for new ideas or voting for something that they do perhaps feel that they can be a part for that team. Yeah that makes sense. And there were many. You know it's kind of like when you're teaching social action class and the social work curriculum when you go to the town hall you want to bring your allies right. I know that people in recycling came out for this event.

[00:18:53] Yeah. That was the great thing. You know teaching in MSW programs and being a student and having been with actions with a Kosa and at the local level it was great to see some social movement action at the international level and how the national issues affected the international and that's kind of you'd asked earlier was this like the protest for the World Cup. Maybe that's good. Even though we were at the conference we had all these side events. So we did a poster session at Fort LeMay overlooking Copacabana at a military museum and that was done with federal university. But one of the side events we did is we pilot tested the eco citizen World Map project and we identified a local partner. There were a couple of local partners one called Transition Towns. Another called Catalytic Communities Colan Rio watch so Rio watch they have a blog in preparation for both the World Cup and Olympics to monitor gentrification and forced relocation due to the construction around the Olympic venues. They identified a neighborhood close to but not adjacent to the stadiums. And we went on a tour and we took our smartphones and we went with the local community center director to see what they were doing and how they navigated being at the edge of rapid change. And just to give a backdrop it might be hard for people in the United States to appreciate this and it was very hard for me to understand this historically and Brazil if you did not live inside the city's boundaries you could not vote in city elections and we may find that trivial because we live outside the city election.

[00:20:54] But in Brazil there are cities and there's the province and there's the country if you don't

live in a city sure maybe you can vote for the provincial governor but there is no entity. It is the province that's responsible for infrastructure social services what have you. There's no entity. And who is it is living outside of the city. ANDRES Well in order to live outside the city boundaries you had to be a certain kind of Brazilian which is of Portuguese descent. Now this is historic going back centuries that's no longer the case. Recently two things happened. One is neighborhoods outside the city limits. And when I say that I'm not talking several miles out. Sometimes city boundaries were gerrymandered in such a way that you had rather dense urbanized areas adjacent to official city jurisdiction but outside and they're called favelas and Portuguese. And that is the name of the native tree that is in the hillsides because usually these were neighborhoods that would run up along hillsides. And so sometime in the last generation those areas were incorporated into the city. And so the residents were given full voting suffrage but in the interim they had developed their own form of governance through non-governmental organizations. They had elections. So it was very analogous to the settlement houses except they weren't outsiders coming in although sometimes outsiders would come in to live infidel. They were people who grew up in the favelas started community centers had elected boards and as they were able to vote in local and even provincial elections they knew how to work the system. They knew how to get pull the levers to get infrastructure improvements.

[00:22:52] Because we take it for granted when we live in a city there is an entity out there building our roads or sidewalks building our sewer system. There's an entity that contracts with the utility company to bring electricity and phone lines or gas lines. So in the favela that wasn't the. So these NGOs in each favela had their own. They would build their own sewer systems. They would bully the utilities through social action to get electricity. They built their own homes. They would develop their own standards for building codes. They were actually often employed in skilled trades so they had the skills and abilities. It was very eye opening because it was actually a beautiful neighborhood. It was about three to four story neighborhood brick construction mostly had electricity phones. They showed us the sewer system that they built. And now the city is going good and putting in their quote unquote official sewer system. And you would see families sitting out in the street with maybe a folding table and they'd have their mac book out. The kids would be playing on a trampoline next to it. It was just a really interesting experience. You know that reminds me of fener. Here we see an NGO providing services that the government should have been providing into space. And it's really a sign of market failure. It's fuel economy at its best. But how can somebody go from there. Or how can a country move from that and into a non-fuel economy.

[00:24:25] And I know that's a larger question but what it sounds like is that you know it's perhaps like these NGOs are what can lead such neighborhoods out of poverty and then perhaps then there can be some semblance of normalcy we can then the field. Right. And I say generally that was the vision we actually had a summit of these NGO leaders. There was this kind of brings me back as I said there are many side events. One of the traditions that a United Nations conference is that NGOs will have a quote unquote protest conference or People's Conference. And so that was actually downtown in the Museum District. But are these NGO do you saying that they're representing the people that are being elected by the people. And just so in Brazil in the favelas I went to they are they are actually directly elected by the people and that is the largest critique of NGOs is that Dan democratic. So you know there are two non-current bodies that are doing things that the government should be doing but in very non-transparent ways. So this is an example of a transparent elected NGO Yeah. As far as I know that's the minority right. Yeah. Unheard of. I can only think of one or two nonprofits in the United States maybe three that have directly elected boards from the residents or members. Well I should say that like the classic example in the United States is the Dudley Street Initiative in Boston the board is elected by the people who live in the geographic boundaries of area that this NGO claims to represent. That is so rare. There are also models of interest to social work.

[00:26:09] You have like service providers that are cooperatives of membership based the village

cooperative in California it's serving with a mental illness but outside of Social Work of course credit unions housing cooperatives have this model. Now back to the people summit where you interjected many of the NGOs there had very little to do with what I would call the people. It was a little bit ironic when you see a sign that says the People's Summit sponsored by the Ford Foundation and U.S. aid still development. Now I did have an internship at USAID and the U.S. Peace Corps I worked as a federal officer and you know I swore to uphold the Constitution but no one escaped. The irony is that it's funny when people get the joke it's like OK I'm not going to explain it to you. Yeah. You know it's so odd but then one of the events I went there USAID and the Vatican cosponsored an indigenous peoples summit and what was interesting to me and you know was in various indigenous languages in Portuguese. But the feeling I got was it actually was quite rare for Brazilians to have what we would call intergroup dialogue. And I attended the University of Michigan one of the focal points for intergroup dialogue. Our listeners might be interested in the work of Mike Spencer and Lorraine Gutierrez and others who use this bottle. But back to the Brazil you had indigenous people from the Amazon maybe with an indigenous spirituality. You had Afro Brazilians who kept some of the traditions of Africa alive in Brazil and then you had people who were Catholic or maybe Protestant having a dialogue of how this relate to sustainability. Is that the most thing to discuss.

[00:28:12] I don't know but it was important to the people there and for some reason major institutions thought it was important and it wasn't something I would think that they would think it's important Well I think you know we get a pretty good idea of what happened at the summit and your experiences there. And it's interesting to know that you were part of eco city builders and that's who you represented at the summit and you thank you for those wonderful insights. It's really good to know and hopefully very useful for social workers working from a structural standpoint. So a related question what advice do you have for social work practitioners who are interested in the three legged stools and how can they promote sustainable development to do work. And I know that you know their individual level factors like you know changes in behaviors individually recycling or using just cold water when your laundry. And then there's the demand for change on a more systemic level in the form of asking that corporations are taxed for carbon more strongly and so on. But how do you combine the two and how do you get students to do those. Yeah that's an excellent question. I think that you have to start with the roots of social work and you know I always take my students back to the London poverty surveys. I take them back to the maps created by Jane Adams by W.E.B DeBois. I always make sure to highlight that W. E. B Dubois was a social worker.

[00:29:45] He ran a settlement house in Philadelphia and they were working in neighborhoods in places and they were trying to improve the environment of those places so they had baps of the language spoken in every house or town house or apartment building. They mapped poverty levels. They mapped also real or perceived environmental contaminants like sewers have miasma miasma was the term for odors that were so bad that you want to vomit because it didn't take a Ph.D. to know if the environment was terrible the well of families would suffer. Of course it takes a Ph.D. to deny this but I think that's the starting point. One of the problems I struggle with is I start there and then a lot of students stay there they think well this happened a hundred years ago it's completely irrelevant. Today is ever more relevant. It's never been more relevant. So I think the answer is different. If you have to put bluntly having exposure on both the East Coast and West Coast the West Coast they call the Midwest the East Coast for some let that slide in the West Coast. The schools have social welfare as they're called. They tend to focus on populations so you would do a child welfare track or an aging track a health or mental health track and then out east. Usually it's a some sort of clinical track or a quote unquote macro or management track and then maybe you have certificates and you can kind of mix and match population or at Michigan they said practice area practice method very complicated. So if you are a clinical social worker you have to understand the impact of the physical environment on your clients period. Yes. And if you don't quite frankly that's malpractice.

[00:31:36] Eileen Gambro wrote the lead article in the Council for Social Work education's journal the Journal for social work education and she lays this out very clearly. Miley Gambrell is a clinical social worker. She has a Ph.D. in psychology and social work from the University of Michigan. She is one of the top experts. She introduced cognitive behavioral therapy to social work. She's like the lone voice in the wilderness sometimes that's a really good point. I do think that it's important to focus on the structure and the system and the social and environmental Nardy to understand how that affects the individual and taking a mental health approach is good but only if you take it into context of the environment. So thank you for making that really important point and that that really is is the basis of social work. When you mention Jane Adams That's what her work was. And that's how we need to move forward. That's a really good point. Yeah and I think like I am not a clinical social worker. I'm grateful for clinical social work. I've been a consumer of clinical social work services. I don't think that say be ashamed of it. I had a much better experience with clinical social workers than say other professions that do similar work. But I was trained mostly in community organization and social policy. So I have two starting points 1 in the community with community based organizations and one in bureaucracy. I tell my students by the end of my class you'll love bureaucracy and believe me. They still don't believe. Maybe they do they just don't admit it. But in the community for example currently I work with a food security and workforce development organization.

[00:33:27] I'll focus hope in Detroit. This organization was responsible for advocating at the national level to get the US Department of Agriculture to have a commodities program so anyone in the United States who has ever used the commodities food program has Detroit to thank for that. But they're not noticed is even though they've been very successful as an organization that neighborhood that they live in has been struggling. It was a nice middle class neighborhood in 1960. Today it has severe challenges with blight with crime. So I've been working with them on their Community Indicators. Just like with the eco city citizen map they have now a data collection on mobile devices and as soon as it's answered it goes into the cloud. They could do their community assessment so you know Focus Hope is doing sustainability initiatives. They're working bringing Greenway through the neighborhood with the alliance that will allow for outdoor recreation opportunities walking biking. It could even during weather permitting provide a great commuting alternative to downtown they are working out the blight. They're going to do work with next summer the I think it's the Evangelical Lutheran churches having a Congress in Detroit. And so they will have 5000 volunteers who will work with Focus hope to clean lots plant trees board up blighted buildings. I spent a good amount of May last summer working on sustainability and community indicators to inform their survey the services that they will do in the neighborhood and I think that's not unusual for social workers to do this is what we do but we do it now in a way that's cognizant of coordinated with various environmental issues.

[00:35:24] OK I'll ask you my last question and that really is just your take on for long. You've talked about proliferation and use as a sign of Sugan market failure when you near them not being able to take responsibility of things that they should be taking responsibility of. So what do you make of this increase in Judaization in the United States as you've talked about in Detroit and in other places. Yeah that's a great question. It certainly is a conversation Detroiters have some applaud NGO ization as a new era of cooperation for lack of a better word. Others are very suspicious that it's really the neo liberal agenda. So in other words that the market has commodified all areas of life and it is squeezing out social life. So I go back often to Juergen Hobert mouse. You know it's not just market failure but also the legitimation crisis that occurs with the state. The market has failed and I think that's with the global economic collapse. 2008 we could see the market bailed out but by the same time there's limits to what various levels of government can do. And I think there's limits to what publicly traded corporations can do. There's limits to what privately held corporations can do. And I think to move forward we have to have a realistic discussion of what's

different sectors can accomplish and how they work in terms of a network especially at the local level and that has to be rooted in a vision of social justice that you know I'm an old timey co-op or like I believe in the value of one person one vote. Unfortunately the market value is one share one vote.

[00:37:13] If one person buys 100 shares usually gets 100 votes right. Right. We have to have a strong voice as social workers say for issues of public concern. You know it's got to be one person one vote. Maybe that's an adult person. We could debate about citizenship but to me that's fundamental to moving forward. Because as long as decisions are made by a handful of people they will never have the access to information needed to make a decision that's good for the public. OK. Well to one person one vote. Thank you so much Dr. Richard and I hope we can do this again. You've been listening to Dr. Richard Smith discuss sustainable development and social work practice in social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history or online and on ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our Web site at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center you'll find it under the Community Resources menu.