

**Abstract: Workshop European Conference 28-30 May 2017**  
**Title: Professional agency of Social Workers in times of austerity**  
**Name: Collin den Braber (NL)**  
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*Keywords: Austerity, Social Work, Capability Approach*

*Workshop: background*

This workshop deals with the effect of austerity measures, usually but not necessary as a consequence of an economic crisis, on social work services and social work. The motivation for the exploration of the subject is mainly based on European empirical research conducted by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) in: Armenia, Austria, Croatia, Georgia, Germany, Iceland, Israel, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and United Kingdom. This IFSW study (IFSW, 2015) was not only limited to countries which are in a significant economic crisis (like Greece and Portugal), but extends to countries one could describe as affluent societies (like the United Kingdom and Germany). Apparently also affluent societies are dealing with serious austerity policies which indicate that austerity measures are not per se related to an economic crisis but rather to social-political reasons. This means that the motivation for the present austerity measures not exclusively follows from the economic crisis of 2007/2008. One can trace the present social-political motivation of austerity back to the eighties of the previous century when the concept of the welfare state was reconstructed, based on ideas which are characterized by ideas such as promotion of free markets, privatization of public goods, strengthening of private property and weakening of labor rights (nowadays often referred to as neoliberal politics). There seemed to be a shift from social policy to market- and managerial ideology and terms like public management. According to Paul Pierson (1998) the shifts in the global economy, relative growth of the service sector, the maturation of governmental commitments, as well as population aging have created an environment of permanent austerity in affluent societies.

*Workshop content: austerity and social work practice*

The IFSW empirical data shows that the impact of austerity measures on people and social work practice are enormous. Historical analyses shows also that reasons for austerity measures differ and are not necessarily related to a real economic crisis but also as a consequence of a voluntary choice by policymakers on an organizational and societal level. This implicates that austerity measures are not incidental events but recurrent. So austerity politics are not incidental and it concerns, often even in one lifetime, a repetitive occasion in the practice of social workers. Then if economic crises and austerity politics have a universal and a structural-repetitious character, how can frontline social workers develop strategies to deal with the consequences of austerity measures in their private and professional lives (since those two are interrelated) and in what way can they protect their own profession because in times of crisis and austerity the status and legitimacy of the social profession in itself is at stake and are sometime also 'victimized' due to austerity measures. This mainly concerns the contraposition: is Social Work an indispensable craft (particular in times of crisis but actually also in general) versus the do-it-yourself ideology where people and volunteers do marginalize social professionals or even make them redundant.

In this workshop we would like to engage in dialogue about the way frontline social workers are dealing with austerity measures in an (professional) ethically and responsible way and in what way are they able to reach (individually or collectively) desirable goals in often difficult circumstances?

As a steppingstone for framing the discussion and especially the results of the discussion, I will make use of a model which is based on the Capability Approach by Ingrid Robeyns. The subject and this model will be explained at the start of the workshop to launch the debate.

### Workshop goals

- 1) This workshop is part of an investigation for a dissertation project about professional agency in times of austerity which will be done in cooperation with the IFSW. This workshop and this conference helps to mold this cooperation and the research design.
- 2) This workshop is aimed at involving as much as possible European front line social workers and social work organizations in the research during and **after** the conference.

Collin den Braber MSc  
Avans University of Applied Sciences  
Human Development and Capability Association  
Dutch-Flemish Network for the application of the capability approach in the social domain  
School of Social Studies  
Hogeschoollaan 1  
4818 CR Breda  
Netherlands  
Tel. Mob. 0031-648497938  
[cpr.denbraber@avans.nl](mailto:cpr.denbraber@avans.nl)

### Annex: Model CA Ingrid Robeyns

