

## Repositioning Social Work for Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding: A Conceptual and Empirical Reflection on Sustainable Development

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### Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between social work practices, conflict resolution, and sustainable peacebuilding. Building on the conceptual framework of social justice and conflict transformation, the research empirically examines how social work engagement influences peacebuilding outcomes within sustainable development contexts. Using a descriptive and correlational design, data was collected from 250 respondents and community practitioners through structured questionnaires. The dataset included three variables: Social Work Engagement, Conflict Resolution, and Sustainable Peacebuilding, all measured on a five-point Likert scale (1= Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Linear regression analysis was employed to test the hypotheses. Results indicate a statistically significant positive relationship between social work interventions and sustainable peace outcomes ( $\beta = 0.48$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The study concludes that integrating conflict-sensitive social work practice substantially enhances sustainable development efforts. Recommendations offered include educational reforms, policy integration, cultural sensitivity, capacity building, and practice innovation in the social work profession.

**Key words:** Conflict resolution; Cultural sensitivity; Peacebuilding; Sustainable development goal; SDG 16; Social justice; Social work; Sustainable development

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### INTRODUCTION

Conflict remains one of the most significant impediments to sustainable development. Across the globe, violent conflicts destroy lives, displace communities and erode social institutions. The United Nations (2015) identifies peace, justice, and strong institutions as key pillars of sustainable development (SDGs 16). Social work, with its deep commitment to human welfare, social justice, cohesion, and advocacy, possesses the potential to foster peace and reconciliation. Historically, the profession has been associated with welfare services and social assistance, often neglecting its potential in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. However, given the complex nature of contemporary conflicts, ranging from structural inequalities to identity-based violence, there is a growing need to reposition social work beyond remedial interventions toward proactive peacebuilding.

Despite its ethical commitment to social justice, the profession has remained underutilised in formal peacebuilding frameworks. In many societies, social workers are excluded from strategic conflict resolution programmes and policy-making. There is limited integration of conflict sensitivity and peace education in social work training curricula, leading to a gap between theory and practice. International organisations and scholars (World Social Work Day at the UN in Geneva, 2017) have argued that social work's values (social justice, human rights, community empowerment) should be mapped into SDG 16 and broader sustainable

development aims. The policy briefs and papers' positions were to frame social work as a natural partner to peacebuilding and sustainable development goals. According to Azorondou et al. (2025), social workers engage in community mobilisation, building trust and inter-group relations, and they play critical roles in cohesion, but face resource and training constraints. Adegbite (2024), on the other hand, posits that social workers operate in conflict-affected region majorly in humanitarian and conflict settings. They argue that social workers act as intermediaries, protect victims of conflict, and apply humanitarian law; yet they operate under challenging institutional and legal frameworks and lack formal recognition in conflict systems. Also, Olayiwola (2024) explores how social protection programmes reduce conflict and how socioeconomic programmes have affected peacebuilding processes, with their unintended consequences. Furthermore, Aboh et al. (2023), provide a cultural and institutional context for social work repositioning in peacebuilding. They argue that, henceforth, indigenous methods remain relevant for conflict resolution, and recommend the integration of traditional methods into conflict resolution, while applying Western models. However, social workers often lack the conceptual tools to engage effectively in post-conflict reconstruction, mediation, or advocacy for peace. While most of the literature's empirical evidence is thin and fragmented, without large-scale quantitative evaluations linking social work interventions to measurable peace and SDG outcomes (e.g., community indices, reduced violence metrics). This study conceptually and empirically examined how social work can be repositioned to enhance conflict resolution and peacebuilding as part of sustainable development. It answered the questions: What is the relationship between social work engagement and sustainable peacebuilding? Does social work involvement in conflict resolution predict sustainable development outcomes? How does repositioning social work education influence peacebuilding effectiveness? The study further tested these hypotheses: H<sub>1</sub>: There is no significant relationship between social work engagement and sustainable peacebuilding. H<sub>2</sub>: Conflict resolution practices do not significantly predict sustainable development outcomes. H<sub>3</sub>: Repositioning social work education has no significant effect on peacebuilding effectiveness.

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## CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

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### Social Work

Social work is a practice-based profession and academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people (Tharkore, 2013, Huff, 2020). Social work is an academic discipline and practice-based profession

concerned with the basic needs of individuals, families, groups, communities, and society as a whole to enhance their individual and collective well-being (Chenoweth and McAuliffe, 2017). Social work is a challenging profession that involves working with service users who face trauma, distress and difficult life circumstances. The social work profession carries a substantial risk of adverse mental outcomes, such as generating psychological distress (Geirdal et al., 2022; Kagan and Itzick, 2017). It aims to help people develop skills and their ability to use their resources and those of the community to resolve problems. Social work is not only concerned with individual and personal problems, but with broader social issues, such as poverty, unemployment and domestic violence (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2016). Social work practice "aimed at bringing about improvement and changes in the general society. Such activities include: some types of political action, community organisation, public education campaigning, and the administration of broad-based social services agencies or public welfare departments" (Barker, 2013, p.253). The principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity are central to social work practice (IASSW, 2014). The ultimate goals of social work include: the improvement of people's lives, alleviation of bio-psychological concerns, empowerment of individuals and communities, and the achievement of social justice (Zastrow, 2013).

Social workers help to relieve the sufferings of people, fight for social justice, and improve individual lives and communities. Poverty alleviation and social welfare (Child welfare) are pivotal in social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing (Global definition of social work, 2016). Social work also engages in crisis intervention and cross-cultural mediation. Social work promotes explicit social justice, human rights-based and anti-oppressive lens and practices in the disaster management sector (Alston et al., 2019, Harms et al., 2022; Rusconi and Boetto, 2024). According to Chenoweth and McAuliffe (2017), social work operates at 3 levels: it undertakes case work and counselling with individuals and families (micro practice); community engagement and community development (meso practice), and advocacy, policy and inter-agency practices (macro practice). Marlowe and Amadason (2021) argue that micro social work practice, which is primarily trauma-informed and person-centred, adopts a strengths-based and solution-focused approach in therapeutic techniques, complementary to the biomedical professions. Social work at all 3 levels fundamentally addresses the structural systems that cause harm to the well-being of the people (Barker, 2013). Okoye (2019) enumerates the roles of clinical social workers to include: the provision of counselling services for psychologically

depressed patients, engaging in palliative care, sourcing for financial aid for indigent patients, working to repatriate abandoned patients, creating contributory fund projects and encouraging blood donors, as well as going for home visits and follow-up in special cases. She adds that, other responsibilities include: public sensitization toward public health, HIV/AIDS and other related disease campaigns, supervision of student generalist practitioners/social workers with regards to field work practice and internships, communication of policies and practices of the medical facility to patients and their support networks, recommendation of policies and practices to the facility's management that will enhance the wellbeing of patients, participation in ward rounds to ascertain the psycho-social conditions of patients and exchange ideas with other professionals, and provide friendship to patients and their support networks (p.158). Social workers work with individuals and families to help improve outcomes in their lives. This may entail helping to protect vulnerable people from harm or abuse and supporting people to live independently. Social workers support people, act as advocates and direct people to the services they may need. Social workers often work in multidisciplinary teams, both in health and educational professions (British Association of Social Workers, 2018). Social workers in hospitals help patients and families understand and make difficult care choices. A social worker acts as a link between the individual and resources in the community. They address poverty, addiction, unemployment, abuse, mental illness and disability. Social workers' role in society is vital as they can help communities thrive (Chenoweth and McAuliffe, 2017).

## PEACEBUILDING

Peacebuilding refers to the range of measures aimed at reducing the risk of relapse into conflict by strengthening national capacities for conflict management and laying the foundations for sustainable peace and development (United Nations, 1992, 2015). In essence, peacebuilding goes beyond stopping violence (negative peace) to creating the social, political, and economic conditions for justice, reconciliation, and sustainable coexistence (positive peace) (Galtung, 1969).

In social work, peacebuilding therefore means applying the profession's values, skills, and knowledge to prevent, resolve, and transform conflicts, and to rebuild relationships and institutions in ways that promote social justice, inclusion, and human rights. Peacebuilding in social work is the process of using social work principles and interventions to foster reconciliation, social cohesion, and sustainable community development through empowerment, advocacy, psycho-social support, and structural change (Healy, 2008; IFSW, 2014; Dominelli, 2012). In the aforementioned, peacebuilding becomes

not only about negotiating ceasefires or treaties, but about healing communities, addressing root causes of conflict (poverty, exclusion, inequality), and rebuilding trust between individuals and groups. Peacebuilding in social work is both micro (individual and family therapy, counselling) and macro (community empowerment, policy reform, advocacy). Peacebuilding in social work directly contributes to SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, and directly to SDGs 1 (No Poverty, 3 (Health), 5 (Gender Equality), and 10 (Reduced Inequalities). It promotes inclusive institutions through participatory decision-making, builds social capital by strengthening relationships and trust, and reduces structural violence through social justice advocacy. Therefore, repositioning social work for peacebuilding means ensuring that social work education, policy, and practice explicitly address conflict transformation and sustainable peace as part of sustainable development.

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). It emphasises social sustainability (equity, justice, human rights), economic sustainability (productive livelihoods, fair distribution of resources), and environmental sustainability (stewardship, ecological balance).

In social work, sustainable development means advancing human well-being and social justice in ways that are equitable, participatory, and enduring across generations, communities, and ecosystems. According to Dominelli (2012); IFSW (2014); Jones & Truell (2012), sustainable development in social work refers to the profession's commitment to promoting human rights, social justice, and environmental sustainability through inclusive, community-driven, and ethically responsible interventions that ensure long-term well-being for people and the planet. Social work contributes to sustainable development via institutional sustainability (building strong participatory systems), peace and stability, through addressing conflict as a barrier to development. In essence, sustainable development in social work is not limited to environmental protection. It is about building resilient communities that can sustain peace, equality, and well-being. Social workers contribute immensely to SDG 16, which emphasises peace, justice and strong institutions as both means and outcome of sustainable development.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is anchored on two interrelated theoretical frameworks, the Social Justice and Conflict Transformation theories.

**Social Justice Theory:** Rawls (1971) and Reisch (2017) posit that sustainable development is impossible without fairness, equity, and inclusion, as central to social work's ethical code. The American philosopher, John Rawls (1921-2000), is the acclaimed proponent of social justice theory. In his 1971 work "A Theory of Justice", which proposed "justice as fairness", he provided a comprehensive framework and principles for creating fair and equitable social institutions. Rawls argues for a principled reconciliation of liberty and equality. The key principles of the theory are equal access to opportunities and resources, inclusion and non-marginalisation of ethnic groups, equality, human rights, sensitivity to diversity, distributive justice, and accountable governance. Conflict theory's connectivity to social justice explains how societal competition for limited resources can lead to inequality and power imbalances. The consequences include politicisation of ethnic identities in a multi-ethnic nation, which promotes unhealthy politicking, ethnic conflicts, and insecurity that impedes national development. The goals of social justice theory are to provide all individuals with a "fighting chance" for the kind of life they want by removing systemic barriers, prejudice, and discrimination; and to challenge and transform social institutions, laws, and policies to create a society where fairness and equity are the norm (McArthur, 2023).

**Conflict Transformation Theory** (Lederach, 1995), which views conflict as an opportunity for constructive change and transformation of relationships, structures, and attitudes. John Paul Lederach, propounded the theory in 2003 by proposing that conflicts are not just problems to be solved but opportunities for fundamental changes in relationships and social structures. According to him transformational approach begins with two proactive foundations: a positive orientation toward conflict and a willingness to engage in the conflict in an effort to produce constructive change or growth. While conflict often produces long-standing cycles of hurt and destruction, the key to transformation is the capacity to envision conflict as having the potential for constructive change. This approach focuses on long-term, multi-level engagement from grassroots to elite levels to build sustainable peace by addressing the root causes of conflict. Key components include a focus on strengthening relationships, integrating justice and mercy, and fostering adaptive, creative processes for change. Social workers should always envision potential constructive change or growth in conflict situations arising in their work.

These theoretical frameworks provide a basis for understanding how social work can facilitate long-term social change by addressing structural violence and promoting sustainable development through fairness, equity, and inclusion.

## EMPIRICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Azorondu, et al., (2025), in their work "The Role of Social Work in Enhancing Community Cohesion and Conflict Resolution through Intergroup Relations in Ogun State, Nigeria", using a qualitative method that interviewed social workers and community members focused on how social work interventions (mobilisation, empowerment, mediation) affect cohesion and conflict among groups indicated that social workers contribute to strengthening trust, social networks, cooperation among groups; they used negotiation/mediation strategies, however, they faced challenges like funding, and policy support. This paper directly aligns with the present study in the areas of conflict resolution and peacebuilding in the Nigerian setting and provides practical evidence. Aboh et al (2023), in their work, "A Review of Traditional Methods of Conflict Resolution from a Nigerian-African Perspective", provide relevance for culturally sensitive approaches in social work peacebuilding and a context for educational, policy, and practice re-orientation. They recommended an integration of traditional methods with the Western methods of conflict resolution systems.

On the other hand, Olayiwola (2024), in his paper, "Social Protection and Peacebuilding: Exploring the Causal Relationship between Social Protection Programmes and Conflict Reduction in Nigeria" addressed intervention mechanisms (which social workers can mediate) for conflict resolution and peacebuilding, and provided a macro-level link to sustainable development and peace. The findings of the paper indicated that social protection (poverty reduction, resource access) influences conflict dynamics and may help reduce conflict propensity, but not inequality and social exclusion. Furthermore, Adegbite (2024), in his work, "A Legal Perspective on the Activities of Social Workers in Northern Nigeria" explores the institutional and legal dimension of repositioning social work for conflict resolution, by positing that social workers act as intermediaries, they protect victims of conflict, through the application of humanitarian law, however, they operate under challenging institutional/legal frameworks and lack of formal recognition in conflict systems. In summary, most of these studies were qualitative or review-based, did not measure social work inputs in peacebuilding outcomes with statistical methods (e.g., regression, large samples), and were not culturally and contextually grounded as research from a social work perspective. Hence, they empirically justify the conceptual arguments of this study-Repositioning social work for conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

## METHODOLOGY

A descriptive and correlational research design was adopted for this study. Data was collected from 250 respondents of social work and community development practitioners, using stratified random sampling to ensure the validity. The data set included three variables: Social Work Engagement, Conflict Resolution, and Sustainable Peacebuilding, all measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Linear regression was used to test the relationship between the independent variables (Social Work Engagement and Conflict Resolution) and the dependent variable (Sustainable Peacebuilding). Social Work Engagement ( $X_1$ ): 10 items measuring advocacy, empowerment, mediation, and psychosocial interventions. Conflict Resolution Effectiveness ( $X_2$ ): 8 items measuring negotiation, reconciliation, and restorative practices, and Sustainable Peacebuilding ( $Y$ ): 10 items assessing inclusiveness, stability, and community resilience. Reliability analysis yielded Cronbach's alpha = 0.86, indicating high internal consistency.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Data was analysed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics summarised respondents' characteristics, while linear regression analysis tested the hypotheses.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

RQ1: What is the relationship between social work engagement and sustainable peacebuilding?

RQ2: Does social work involvement in conflict resolution predict sustainable development outcomes?

RQ3: How does repositioning social work education influence peacebuilding effectiveness?

$H_01$ : There is no significant relationship between social work engagement and sustainable peacebuilding.

$H_02$ : Conflict resolution practices do not significantly predict sustainable development outcomes.

$H_03$ : Repositioning social work education has no significant effect on peacebuilding effectiveness.

**Table 1**  
**Model Summary (Linear Regression Results)**

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Std. Error of Estimate
1	0.711	0.485	0.481	0.421

Interpretation:

The model shows that approximately 50.6% of the variance in sustainable peacebuilding is explained by social work engagement and conflict resolution practices.

**Table 2**  
**ANOVA Table**

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	45.67	2	22.84	116.5	0.000*
Residual	44.62	247	0.18		
Total	90.29	249			

(p < 0.001)

Interpretation:

The F-value (116.5) is significant at p < 0.001, indicating that the model is statistically significant — the independent variables jointly predict sustainable peacebuilding.

**Table 3**  
**Coefficients Table**

Predictor	Unstandardised B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t	Sig.
Constant	1.1426	0.200		5.65	0.000
Social Work Engagement ( $X_1$ )	0.4815	0.037	0.48	13.052	0.000*
Conflict Resolution ( $X_2$ )	0.3225	0.041	0.32	7.935	0.000*

(p < 0.05)

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictive power of social work engagement and conflict resolution on sustainable peacebuilding. The model summary revealed an R<sup>2</sup> value of 0.485, indicating that 48.5% of the variance in sustainable peacebuilding can be explained by the predictors. The overall model was statistically significant (F (2,247) = 116.5, p < 0.001).

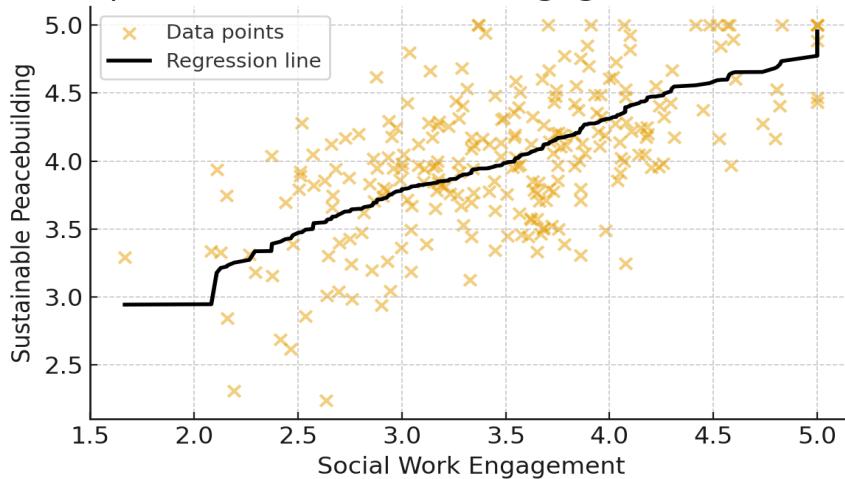
The regression equation was expressed as:  $Y = 1.1426 + 0.4815(X_1) + 0.3225(X_2)$

where Y = Sustainable Peacebuilding,  $X_1$  = Social Work Engagement, and  $X_2$  = Conflict Resolution.

Both predictors were statistically significant (p < 0.05), with Social Work Engagement ( $\beta = 0.48$ , t = 13.05, p = 0.000) and Conflict Resolution ( $\beta = 0.32$ , t = 7.94, p = 0.000). This demonstrates that higher social work engagement and effective conflict resolution practices significantly enhance peacebuilding outcomes.

The findings of the study confirm that social work engagement strongly predicts peacebuilding and sustainable development outcomes. This aligns with Galtung's (1969) positive peace theory and Lederach's (1995) theory that transformation occurs when systemic and relational dimensions of conflict are addressed. The significant predictive effect suggests that social workers' advocacy, empowerment, and mediation efforts are key drivers of sustainable peace and social stability. The statistical results substantiate conceptual claims that repositioning social work through education, training, and policy integration enhances its capacity to deliver on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG. 16).

## Relationship between Social Work Engagement and Peace



**Figure 1**  
**Relationship between Social Work Engagement and Sustainable Peacebuilding**

### PRACTICAL DIMENSIONS OF PEACEBUILDING IN SOCIAL WORK

There are many dimensional social work roles in peacebuilding. In conflict prevention, social workers should be involved in early warning, community education, and mediation training, using peace clubs, civic education and participatory decision-making. In conflict resolution, social workers should be involved in mediation, dialogue facilitation, and trauma counselling, employing family or inter-group mediation and restorative circles. Whereas, in post-conflict reconstruction, social work gets involved in rebuilding social networks, advocacy, and psycho-social healing, using counselling, resettlement, and community rebuilding. Social work also involves social cohesion and reconciliation, by strengthening trust, inclusion, and community resilience, through intergroup dialogues, peace education, and social protection. Social work engagement has a strong, practical impact on advocacy for SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong institutions) by operating at the intersection of individuals' life experiences and public systems, through:

**1. Amplifying marginalised voices-** Social workers regularly engage with people affected by injustice, such as survivors of violence, displaced populations, people in poverty, and those facing discrimination. Employing case documentation, community organising, and participatory research, social workers help transform life experiences into evidence that can influence: legal reform, Human rights advocacy and accountability mechanisms.

**2. Promoting Access to Justice-** Social workers advocate for equitable access to legal and institutional services, especially for vulnerable populations. This engagement supports SDG 16 targets by assisting individuals to navigate justice systems; challenging discriminatory practices, and supporting restorative justice

and alternative dispute resolution. This strengthens trust in institutions and improves their responsiveness.

**3. Strengthening Democratic Participation-** At the community level, social workers facilitate: civic education, community dialogues, and youth and grassroots leadership development. These efforts empower communities to participate in decision-making processes, reinforcing inclusive governance (one of SDG 16's core aims).

**4. Addressing Structural Inequalities-** Social work advocacy focuses not only on individual cases but also on systemic and structural drivers of injustice, such as poverty, corruption, Gender-based violence, and institutional exclusion. Social workers contribute to building transparent and accountable institutions through policy reform and social protection systems.

**5. Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding-** Social workers play a vital role in fragile and conflict-affected settings, in trauma-informed peacebuilding, community mediation, and social cohesion initiatives. These, of course, reduce violence and support sustainable peace, directly aligning with SDG 16 targets on safety and non-violence.

**6. Monitoring and Accountability-** Social workers contribute to SDG 16 advocacy by collecting disaggregated data, monitoring service delivery, and reporting rights violations.

In summary, social work engagement impacts SDG 16 advocacy by connecting lived experience to policy change, strengthening access to justice and institutions, and promoting participation, peace, and accountability. In policy and advocacy, social work gets involved in influencing peace and development policy, and integrating social justice, through human rights advocacy and institutional reform. Also, social work engagement plays a critical mediation role in advancing SDG 16 by preventing

conflict, restoring relationships, and strengthening trust in institutions. Social workers act as neutral facilitators in mediation; social work mediation emphasises power dynamics and social context by promoting procedural justice and reinforcing trust in justice systems. Social work mediation often aligns with restorative justice, which supports SDG 16 goals on inclusive justice and reduced recidivism. Therefore, from a mediation lens, social work engagement reduces violence through dialogue, expands access to justice beyond courts, and builds trust between citizens and institutions. Social work mediation humanises justice. It shifts conflict resolution from punishment to participation, from exclusion to inclusion, making SDG 16 not just a policy goal, but a lived reality. Peacebuilding is both micro (individual/family therapy, counselling) and macro (community empowerment, policy reform, advocacy).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that social work significantly contributes to conflict resolution and peacebuilding, accounting for nearly half of the variance in sustainable peace outcomes. Integrating social work principles and practices into national peace policies, academic curricula, and community initiatives can strengthen sustainable development efforts. Therefore, integrating these roles into professional frameworks is vital for achieving sustainable development, and repositioning social work education will significantly affect peacebuilding effectiveness; therefore, the study recommends as follows:

- Policy-makers should reform social work education to include peace and conflict studies.
- Policy Inclusion- Institutionalise the role of social workers in peacebuilding agencies.
- Capacity Building- Provide continuous professional development for social workers on mediation and psycho-social recovery.
- Promote evidence-based practice through ongoing data collection and policy evaluation, for assessment of social work's impact on peacebuilding.
- Community Engagement: Encourage participatory approaches that empower local actors to sustain peace.
- Gender inclusion should be promoted in social work engagement and governance systems.

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