

# Exploring Legal Frameworks and Ethical Boundaries: A Comparative Analysis of Social Work and Philanthropy in Supporting Vulnerable Populations

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## Abstract

In the pursuit of social justice and human well-being, two important forces drive societal change: social work and philanthropy. Both share a common goal of improving the lives of individuals and communities, yet their approaches, legal frameworks, and methods differ significantly. While social work is grounded in professional ethics and legal mandates, philanthropy is often seen as voluntary charitable giving or resource distribution. Understanding these differences is essential for both legal and social systems, as they shape the ways in which assistance is provided to those in need. This paper seeks to examine the legal distinctions between social work and philanthropy, analyzing how each operates within its legal framework and contributes to societal well-being. The overlap between these fields can create challenges in defining the boundaries of legal accountability, professional practice, and ethical responsibilities within these domains. By understanding these distinctions, the paper intends to clarify how each field functions legally and how they complement each other in promoting social welfare. This paper will examine the legal frameworks, regulatory bodies and professional standards that apply to social workers versus philanthropists, and explore the ethical responsibilities and legal accountability of both social work professionals and philanthropic organizations. It will also delve into the impact of these fields on social change and individual well-being from a legal perspective, providing recommendations for legal improvements to enhance the efficacy and accountability of both fields. This study will employ a comparative legal analysis, examining relevant laws, regulations, and professional codes of ethics for both social work and philanthropy. Secondary data, such as academic articles, legal texts, and reports from regulatory bodies, will be analyzed to support the discussion. By investigating these areas, this paper will contribute to a deeper

understanding of how social work and philanthropy function within legal contexts and their respective roles in supporting vulnerable populations.

**Keywords:** Social work, Philanthropy, legal frameworks, ethical responsibilities, vulnerable populations

## 1. Introduction

The pursuit of social justice and human well-being has driven societal changes for centuries, with social work and philanthropy serving as two of the most significant forces in shaping social welfare. Both fields aim to improve the lives of individuals and communities in need, but their approaches, legal frameworks, and ethical considerations differ significantly. Social work is rooted in professional ethics and legal mandates, with social workers often acting as agents of change through direct service, policy advocacy, and systemic reform (Lietz, 2021). In contrast, philanthropy tends to be more voluntary, often characterized by charitable giving or resource distribution from individuals, foundations, or organizations aiming to alleviate suffering and foster social betterment (Glynn et al., 2020). Despite their shared goal of societal welfare, the distinctions between social work and philanthropy especially in legal and ethical contexts are crucial for understanding their unique roles in promoting justice and equity (Lankau & Overstreet, 2021).

The history of social work as a formal profession began in the late 19th century, when urbanization, industrialization, and the rise of poverty and inequality created a need for organized efforts to address social issues. The social work profession arose from the efforts of pioneers like Jane Addams, who advocated for social justice and systemic change, and Mary Ellen Richmond, who developed the casework model to help individuals cope with social problems (Harris, 2020). Initially focused on poverty alleviation, social work evolved over time to address a broad range of social concerns, including child welfare, mental health, and the rights of marginalized communities. The profession is characterized by its emphasis on social justice, dignity, and respect for individuals (Barker, 2020). Through its structured framework of licensing, ethical standards, and professional mandates, social work has become a field deeply intertwined with legal and policy frameworks aimed at protecting the vulnerable (Lietz, 2021).

Philanthropy, while similarly concerned with social well-being, has its roots in older traditions of giving and charity. The modern form of philanthropy, however, began in the 19th century, particularly with wealthy industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, who institutionalized charitable giving through large-scale foundations (Frumkin, 2020). Unlike social work, philanthropy has traditionally been more voluntary and less regulated, often focused on the distribution of resources for immediate relief rather than long-term systemic change (Payton, 2023). However, as philanthropy has grown into a multi-billion-dollar sector, it has also become more structured, with an increasing emphasis on accountability, strategic giving, and measurable social outcomes (Glynn et al., 2020). Today, philanthropic efforts are largely shaped by organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which combine charitable giving with business-like models to solve global health and education problems (Brest & Harvey, 2021).

Despite their shared goals, social work and philanthropy operate under different legal frameworks, leading to significant distinctions in their practice. Social work is governed by a network of laws, licensing boards, and regulatory bodies that mandate the conduct of social workers, ensuring they adhere to professional ethics and standards (Lankau & Overstreet, 2021). Social workers are typically required to hold degrees, maintain professional licenses, and follow a formal code of ethics established by organizations such as the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (NASW, 2021). The professional ethics in social work emphasize principles like justice, autonomy, and respect for the dignity of individuals (Reamer, 2021). These legal and ethical frameworks help ensure that social work practice is effective, accountable, and aligned with the social contract that aims to protect vulnerable populations.

Philanthropy, on the other hand, is less regulated in a formal sense. Though it operates under some legal constraints such as tax laws that incentivize charitable donations, there is no universally mandated professional code of ethics for philanthropists, and the practice is generally guided by the values and missions of individual philanthropists or philanthropic organizations (Frumkin, 2020). Donors are not typically required to hold credentials or adhere to established professional norms when engaging in philanthropy, which can lead to inconsistencies in the effectiveness of charitable efforts (Payton, 2023). Furthermore, philanthropic organizations are often accountable to their stakeholders, including donors, clients, and beneficiaries, but the legal frameworks around accountability remain less robust than those guiding social work (Brest & Harvey, 2021). The overlap between social work and philanthropy has generated significant legal and ethical complexities, particularly when philanthropists support social work initiatives. In some cases, philanthropists have partnered with social work organizations to deliver aid to marginalized groups, but questions about accountability and the role of money in shaping social welfare interventions arise (Lankau & Overstreet, 2021). For instance, concerns have been raised about whether philanthropic funding can influence social work priorities, shifting the focus from community needs to the preferences of donors (Frumkin, 2020). Such intersections of philanthropy and social work can create challenges in determining which sector holds responsibility for outcomes, especially when the contributions of each field blur traditional boundaries of legal accountability. One area where the convergence of social work and philanthropy is especially important is in their collective work with vulnerable populations. Both social work and philanthropy have been key in addressing the needs of individuals experiencing poverty, mental health issues, homelessness, and other challenges. However, while social work professionals are trained to deliver direct services and advocate for policy changes, philanthropy often provides the financial resources that enable such efforts to occur (Glynn et al., 2020). The synergy between these two forces can create lasting impact, but only if the legal frameworks governing them are aligned and clear. Legal distinctions between social work and philanthropy must be better understood to promote a collaborative and accountable approach to addressing complex social issues (Harris, 2020).

The primary goal of this paper is to investigate the legal distinctions between social work and philanthropy, examining their respective regulatory frameworks, ethical responsibilities, and impacts on societal well-being. This paper will provide a comparative analysis of the two fields, highlighting their unique roles in social welfare and how legal systems can improve their

effectiveness. By understanding the differences in their legal and ethical underpinnings, this paper will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how social work and philanthropy complement each other in promoting social justice and human dignity. This paper is structured as follows: The first section provides an introduction of the historical context and development of social work and philanthropy. The second defines germane terminologies, the third part delves into the legal frameworks that govern social work and philanthropy, analyzing how each field is regulated. The fourth section focuses on the ethical responsibilities and professional accountability within both fields, highlighting the moral obligations guiding social workers and philanthropists. The fifth section examines the intersection between social work and philanthropy in addressing vulnerable populations and discusses their collective societal impact. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations for improving legal frameworks and enhancing the roles of both social work and philanthropy in advancing social welfare.

## **2. Definition of Terms**

### *2.1 Social Work*

Social work is a profession dedicated to promoting social change, improving individual and community well-being, and addressing systemic inequalities. It operates through the application of knowledge from social sciences, psychology, and law to empower individuals, families, and communities facing challenges such as poverty, mental health issues, abuse, and social exclusion. Social work relies on ethical principles, including client self-determination, confidentiality, and respect for human dignity, as outlined in professional codes of conduct (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). Reamer (2018) explains that social work involves a range of methods, including casework, group work, community development, advocacy, and research. Practitioners often collaborate with government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and healthcare providers to deliver comprehensive services. Legal frameworks play a significant role in regulating social work practices, ensuring accountability, and safeguarding the rights of clients. The profession emphasizes cultural competence and evidence-based practices to effectively address diverse needs.

### *2.2 Philanthropy*

Philanthropy refers to the voluntary provision of resources—such as money, time, and expertise by individuals or organizations to address societal issues and improve the quality of life for others. It encompasses a wide range of activities, including charitable giving, the establishment of foundations, and strategic initiatives aimed at social betterment. According to Payton and Moody (2008), philanthropy is both an expression of altruism and a practical means of addressing systemic challenges, such as education inequality, poverty, and healthcare access. Modern philanthropy often involves targeted interventions designed to create measurable social impact, distinguishing it from spontaneous acts of charity. Philanthropic activities are guided by ethical considerations, including transparency, equitable distribution of resources, and respect for the dignity of beneficiaries. Legal frameworks, such as tax incentives and regulations for nonprofit organizations, shape the practice of philanthropy and ensure accountability. Philanthropy complements governmental efforts by funding innovative solutions to complex social problems.

### *2.3 Legal Frameworks*

Legal frameworks are structured systems of laws, policies, and regulations that govern actions within specific fields to ensure ethical conduct, accountability, and protection of rights. In social work, legal frameworks include licensing requirements, confidentiality laws, child protection statutes, and guidelines for mental health services (Banks, 2012). These regulations ensure that social workers adhere to professional standards while safeguarding the rights and interests of clients. In philanthropy, legal frameworks address tax benefits for charitable giving, governance of nonprofit organizations, and international aid compliance. Salamon (1995) emphasizes that robust legal structures are essential for fostering transparency, preventing resource misuse, and maintaining public trust. Regulatory bodies, such as licensing boards and government agencies, enforce these laws to ensure that organizations and professionals operate responsibly. Understanding and adhering to legal frameworks is fundamental for both social work and philanthropy to achieve their goals effectively and ethically.

### *2.4 Ethical Responsibilities*

Ethical responsibilities are moral obligations that guide the actions and decision-making of professionals and organizations. In social work, ethical responsibilities are formalized in codes of ethics, such as the NASW Code of Ethics, which emphasizes principles like promoting social justice, respecting client autonomy, and maintaining professional integrity (Reamer, 2018). These responsibilities ensure that social workers prioritize the well-being of clients while navigating complex interpersonal and systemic challenges. Philanthropy also involves significant ethical considerations, including ensuring transparency in funding, avoiding conflicts of interest, and promoting equitable access to resources. Banks (2012) highlights that ethical responsibilities in philanthropy and social work are particularly critical when working with vulnerable populations, as they help mitigate power imbalances and ensure fairness. Upholding ethical responsibilities is not only a professional duty but also a critical component of maintaining trust and credibility within communities and among stakeholders.

### *2.5 Vulnerable Populations*

Vulnerable populations are groups or individuals who experience heightened risks of harm, marginalization, or inequality due to social, economic, or health-related factors. These populations may include individuals experiencing poverty, homelessness, chronic illness, disability, or systemic discrimination. Mechanic and Tanner (2007) define vulnerability as a dynamic state influenced by factors such as environmental conditions, social policies, and access to resources. Addressing the needs of vulnerable populations is a central focus of both social work and philanthropy. Social workers advocate for equitable access to healthcare, housing, education, and employment opportunities while addressing systemic barriers. Philanthropists often direct resources toward programs that target these groups, aiming to alleviate immediate hardships and promote long-term empowerment. Legal frameworks play an essential role in safeguarding the rights of vulnerable populations, ensuring that interventions are both ethical and effective. Multidisciplinary approaches are often necessary to create sustainable solutions.

### *2.6 Professional Accountability*

Professional accountability refers to the obligation of individuals and organizations to uphold ethical standards, adhere to legal mandates, and act responsibly in their professional roles. In social work, accountability involves compliance with licensing requirements, ethical codes, and professional guidelines, ensuring that practitioners provide competent and ethical services (Reamer, 2013). Social workers are accountable to clients, employers, and regulatory bodies, with mechanisms in place to address misconduct or incompetence. In philanthropy, professional accountability encompasses transparency in financial reporting, adherence to legal regulations, and ethical decision-making in resource allocation. Salamon (1995) notes that a lack of accountability can undermine the credibility of philanthropic efforts and erode public trust. Mechanisms such as audits, evaluations, and stakeholder engagement are essential for maintaining accountability in both fields. By ensuring transparency and integrity, professional accountability fosters trust and enhances the effectiveness of interventions aimed at social betterment.

### *2.7 Regulatory Bodies*

Regulatory bodies are institutions or organizations responsible for overseeing the practices, standards, and compliance of specific professions or sectors. In social work, regulatory bodies, such as licensing boards and professional associations, enforce ethical codes, investigate complaints, and ensure adherence to legal requirements. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is an example of a regulatory body that sets standards for ethical practice in the United States (NASW, 2021). In philanthropy, regulatory bodies oversee nonprofit governance, tax compliance, and transparency in charitable activities. Salamon (1995) highlights the critical role of these organizations in maintaining public trust and ensuring that resources are used effectively. Regulatory bodies serve as gatekeepers, providing guidelines, enforcing accountability, and promoting ethical practices across both fields. Their oversight is fundamental to maintaining the integrity and credibility of social work and philanthropy.

### *2.8 Charitable Giving*

Charitable giving is the voluntary act of donating money, goods, or services to individuals, organizations, or causes in need. Andreoni (2006) describes charitable giving as both an expression of altruism and a strategic tool for addressing social inequalities. It encompasses a wide range of activities, from small individual donations to large-scale philanthropic initiatives funded by corporations or foundations. Modern trends in charitable giving include impact-driven philanthropy, where donors focus on measurable outcomes, and crowdfunding, which leverages technology to reach broader audiences. Legal frameworks, such as tax incentives and donation regulations, encourage charitable contributions and ensure that resources are directed toward legitimate causes. While charitable giving plays a critical role in addressing immediate needs, it also fosters long-term social change by funding initiatives that address systemic issues, such as education, healthcare, and environmental conservation.

### *2.9 Societal Impact*

Societal impact refers to the broad and measurable effects of actions, policies, or initiatives on communities, systems, and society as a whole. In social work, societal impact is achieved through interventions that address root causes of inequality, promote social justice, and improve collective well-being. According to Ebrahim and Rangan (2014), societal impact is often assessed through metrics that evaluate the effectiveness of programs in achieving intended outcomes. In philanthropy, societal impact is a central goal, with initiatives designed to address systemic challenges, such as poverty reduction, educational equity, and public health improvements. Measuring societal impact helps organizations determine the success of their efforts and refine strategies for greater effectiveness. Both social work and philanthropy contribute to societal impact by fostering sustainable change and addressing the needs of marginalized populations through advocacy, direct service, and funding.

### **3. Legal Frameworks That Govern Social Work and Philanthropy**

The legal frameworks that govern social work and philanthropy are vital in ensuring the professional conduct of social workers and the ethical practices of philanthropic organizations. These frameworks not only regulate the operations of these fields but also promote accountability, transparency, and the protection of vulnerable individuals. Despite their shared goal of improving societal welfare, social work and philanthropy operate within distinct legal structures that reflect their differing methods, purposes, and focus areas. Understanding these legal frameworks helps to clarify the boundaries and responsibilities of both fields, offering insight into their impact on social change, justice, and equality;

#### **i. Legal Frameworks for Social Work**

Social work is inherently governed by a comprehensive set of legal regulations designed to uphold its professional standards and ethical duties. In particular, social workers must operate under specific licensing laws, follow ethical codes of conduct, and abide by statutory laws that regulate their practice in areas such as child protection, mental health, and welfare services. These frameworks ensure that social workers are adequately trained and qualified to handle sensitive issues related to vulnerable populations. For example, in the United States, the legal landscape for social work is shaped by a variety of state and federal laws. The Social Security Act (1935), specifically Title IV, is a critical piece of legislation that has shaped social work practice by creating programs to support children, families, and individuals in need. Ferguson et al. (2020) explain that “The Social Security Act laid the foundation for welfare and social work interventions in public policy, affecting child welfare services and family support mechanisms.” Additionally, state-based licensing boards in the U.S. ensure that social workers meet rigorous qualifications before they are allowed to practice. These boards enforce continuing education requirements and ethical standards to ensure that social workers remain competent and responsible in their roles. The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) (1974), a federal law in the U.S., is another critical piece of legislation that influences social work practice. According to Smyth & Robinson (2021), “CAPTA provides the necessary framework for social workers to intervene in cases of child abuse and neglect, ensuring that there are specific reporting and protective actions that social workers must take when working with children in danger.” This law underscores the legal responsibilities of social workers in

safeguarding children and ensuring their well-being.

In the United Kingdom, social work practice is regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), a regulatory body that sets the professional standards for social workers and ensures compliance with ethical guidelines. As Laitinen (2020) notes, “The Children Act 1989 laid down the legal duties of social workers in relation to child welfare, emphasizing that children's welfare should always be the paramount concern in any intervention.” The Children and Families Act 2014 further reinforced social workers’ responsibilities by improving child protection procedures and expanding support for children with special needs and disabilities. In Nigeria, the Social Work Registration Council of Nigeria (SWRCON) is the statutory body responsible for regulating the practice of social work. The SWRCON Act (2019) established mandatory licensing for social workers and outlined the qualifications necessary for professional practice in the country. According to the National Social Protection Policy (2020), “Social workers in Nigeria are tasked with improving the welfare of vulnerable populations, and their role is to provide crucial services in the areas of poverty alleviation, child protection, and support for marginalized groups.” Nigeria’s efforts to regulate social work are also guided by international frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989), which mandates the protection of children from harm and exploitation.

Globally, social work is influenced by major international treaties, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). According to UNICEF (2020), “These global instruments emphasize social work’s role in advocating for children’s rights and supporting policies that ensure equitable access to health, education, and social services.” Social work aligns with SDG 10, which aims to reduce inequalities by promoting social inclusion, ensuring that social workers uphold human dignity and advocate for marginalized populations.

## **ii. Regulatory and Legal Structures Governing Philanthropy**

Philanthropy, in contrast, is governed by a more relaxed regulatory structure, largely focusing on financial transparency, charitable status, and tax regulations. Philanthropic organizations and individuals are often exempt from taxes due to their charitable purposes, but they must adhere to strict rules to maintain their tax-exempt status and ensure that funds are used appropriately. While philanthropic organizations do not have the same rigorous professional codes as social workers, their legal frameworks prioritize financial accountability and the effective use of resources. For example, in the United States, 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code governs charitable organizations, providing them with tax-exempt status as long as they demonstrate that their activities serve the public good. Cunningham & Uvin (2021) state, “501(c)(3) organizations must meet strict legal and financial reporting requirements, ensuring that donations are used for their intended charitable purposes and that their operations are transparent to the public.” Furthermore, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) enforces regulations to protect donors from fraudulent solicitation practices, ensuring that philanthropy remains trustworthy and transparent. In Canada, the Income Tax Act (R.S.C., 1985) defines the legal framework for registered charitable organizations, offering tax exemptions for donations



made to such entities. The Canada Revenue Agency (2020) mandates that charities file annual returns that detail how funds are spent and demonstrate that they are serving the public interest. Philanthropic organizations must also ensure that their activities comply with the Canada Corporations Act, which provides guidelines for their governance and management.

In the United Kingdom, the Charities Act 2011 governs the operations of charitable organizations, setting out regulations for their registration, management, and reporting. The Charity Commission for England and Wales oversees compliance with these regulations, ensuring that philanthropic organizations operate transparently and responsibly. The Charity Commission stipulates that “charities must comply with the requirements for financial disclosure, ensuring that donations are used effectively to achieve the organization’s charitable purposes.” In Nigeria, philanthropy is regulated through the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) (2020), which requires charitable organizations to register with the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) to gain legal recognition. The Tax Administration Act (2019) provides tax exemptions for philanthropic organizations, as long as they demonstrate their commitment to public service. As per the Income Tax Act (2020), donations made to registered charities in Nigeria may be tax-deductible, incentivizing individuals and organizations to support charitable causes. Philanthropy is also encouraged to align its efforts with international goals, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasize the need for public-private partnerships to achieve global development objectives. For instance, philanthropists such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation have made significant strides in global health and education by funding initiatives that directly contribute to the achievement of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education). Glynn et al. (2020) assert that “Philanthropists, through funding health initiatives and education programs, directly contribute to poverty alleviation and the advancement of the SDGs, supporting global efforts for sustainable development.” The legal frameworks governing social work and philanthropy are designed to ensure that both fields maintain accountability, professionalism, and transparency. While social work is heavily regulated through licensing, ethical standards, and national laws focused on protecting vulnerable populations, philanthropy operates within a more flexible legal framework, primarily focused on financial accountability and the effective use of charitable funds. However, both sectors are increasingly encouraged to align their activities with international standards, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to create a more equitable, just, and sustainable world. Understanding the legal nuances of these two fields allows professionals and organizations to navigate their responsibilities and contribute meaningfully to social change.

#### **4. Ethical Guidelines and Professional Accountability in Social Work and Philanthropy: A Comparative Analysis**

Ethical responsibilities and professional accountability form the cornerstone of both social work and philanthropy. These principles guide professionals and organizations in their efforts to serve vulnerable individuals and communities, ensuring integrity, fairness, and a commitment to the public good. While both fields aim to promote human well-being and social justice, their ethical standards, frameworks, and methods of ensuring accountability differ significantly. Social workers operate under a highly regulated system of professional codes,

national laws, and international ethical standards. In contrast, philanthropists work within a more flexible framework focused on financial transparency, ethical giving, and social responsibility. Understanding the ethical guidelines and professional accountability that govern these fields is crucial for ensuring their success in promoting sustainable, equitable outcomes for vulnerable groups.

### **i. Ethical Responsibilities in Social Work**

Social work is governed by a strong ethical framework designed to ensure that social workers prioritize human dignity, social justice, and the protection of vulnerable individuals and communities. The central ethical responsibility of social workers is to advocate for the well-being of clients, especially those who are marginalized, oppressed, or experiencing social inequality. Social workers are expected to engage in practices that promote human rights, prevent harm, and empower individuals and communities to overcome systemic barriers. For example, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (2021) is the most widely recognized ethical guideline for social workers in the United States, setting out clear standards for social work practice. According to the NASW Code, “Social workers must recognize and respect the inherent dignity and worth of all individuals and work to promote social justice through service to humanity” (NASW, 2021). This fundamental commitment ensures that social workers prioritize the welfare and autonomy of their clients, always considering their rights and needs. Internationally, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) establishes ethical standards for social work practice, emphasizing the importance of human rights, social inclusion, and cultural respect. The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (2012), a key document from the IFSW, articulates ethical principles that guide social work practice across the world. The agenda advocates for the empowerment of individuals and communities, with a focus on reducing inequality and enhancing human well-being. As noted by Laitinen (2020), “Social work is rooted in a commitment to human dignity, advocating for the elimination of poverty, social exclusion, and marginalization.”

The ethical framework for social work also includes specific principles designed to guide decision-making in complex and often morally ambiguous situations. One central principle is confidentiality. Social workers are entrusted with highly sensitive information about their clients, and the ethical responsibility to maintain confidentiality is a key aspect of professional conduct. However, this ethical responsibility is not absolute; social workers must balance confidentiality with their duty to protect vulnerable individuals. The NASW Code of Ethics (2021) asserts that, “Social workers should disclose confidential information only when the client has consented, when required by law, or when there is a compelling professional reason to do so” (NASW, 2021). This demonstrates the nuanced ethical responsibilities that social workers face, as their duty to protect individuals may sometimes require breaching confidentiality. Additionally, social workers are ethically bound to practice cultural competence, which involves recognizing and respecting the cultural identities of clients and using culturally appropriate interventions. This responsibility ensures that social work services are tailored to the unique needs of each client, rather than imposing generalized solutions. Leung et al. (2020) state, “Culturally competent social work practice involves understanding cultural differences

and applying this understanding to facilitate effective intervention and support.” This ethical commitment helps social workers create a more inclusive and equitable environment for clients from diverse backgrounds.

## **ii. Ethical Responsibilities in Philanthropy**

Philanthropy, although not as rigidly structured as social work, operates within an ethical framework that centers on transparency, financial integrity, and social responsibility. Philanthropists are guided by principles of ethical giving, which require them to use their financial resources in a way that promotes positive social change and addresses societal needs. While social work focuses on direct service provision, philanthropy often involves financial donations and resource allocation, which must be done with the utmost ethical consideration to avoid perpetuating inequalities or harming the very communities they aim to help. For example, the Charity Commission for England and Wales provides clear ethical guidelines for philanthropic organizations, emphasizing the importance of transparency in fundraising and financial accountability. According to the Commission, “Charitable organizations must provide clear and honest communication to donors, ensuring that funds are used in alignment with the organization’s stated mission and objectives.” Transparency is a central ethical tenet in philanthropy because it fosters trust and encourages donors to continue supporting philanthropic causes. Financial oversight ensures that funds are utilized efficiently and responsibly. Philanthropic organizations, particularly in the United States, must adhere to the regulatory requirements established by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), particularly for those organizations designated as 501(c)(3) charitable organizations. These organizations are required to maintain public accountability through Form 990, which details their revenue, expenditures, and charitable activities. Donors can access this form to assess how their contributions are being spent, which encourages philanthropists to be diligent in ensuring that their charitable actions align with their stated missions and ethical obligations.

Additionally, ethical philanthropists must be conscious of their power and influence, especially when operating in developing regions or working with marginalized communities. Power imbalances can emerge when wealthy philanthropists impose their values or solutions without considering the needs and voices of the communities they aim to help. As noted by Balsinger & Eubanks (2020), “Philanthropy must be approached with humility, avoiding the ‘white savior’ complex by listening to and collaborating with local communities, ensuring that they are part of the decision-making process.” This ethical responsibility prevents philanthropists from exerting undue influence or perpetuating paternalism in their charitable efforts. Ethical philanthropy also entails a commitment to ensuring that funds are directed toward sustainable initiatives that bring long-term benefits to communities, rather than short-term fixes. Glynn et al. (2020) emphasize that philanthropists should focus on impact investing and supporting social enterprises that have the potential to generate sustainable social, economic, and environmental outcomes. Impact investing integrates financial returns with social returns, allowing philanthropists to address pressing global challenges such as poverty, inequality, and climate change while still achieving financial objectives.

## **iii. Professional Accountability in Social Work**

Accountability in social work ensures that social workers meet their ethical obligations while upholding professional standards. Professional accountability involves a combination of legal obligations, supervision, and peer review to ensure that social workers adhere to ethical codes and practice safely and effectively. Social workers are held accountable by regulatory bodies, such as the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) in the UK and various state licensing boards in the U.S., which set qualifications and standards for professional practice. These bodies ensure that social workers maintain their professional integrity and provide competent services to clients. For example, in the U.S., social workers must renew their licenses periodically and demonstrate that they have completed the necessary continuing education requirements. According to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), “Social workers must engage in lifelong learning to maintain professional competency and stay informed about changes in policy and practice.” Another key aspect of professional accountability in social work is supervision, where senior social workers guide and review the practice of junior professionals. Supervision allows social workers to discuss difficult cases, receive feedback, and develop their professional skills. Peer review processes, including case discussions and consultations, help ensure that social workers meet high standards of practice. As Winer & Goodhart (2020) note, “Supervision is vital in maintaining accountability, providing social workers with the opportunity to discuss ethical dilemmas and receive guidance from more experienced colleagues.” In addition to supervision, social workers are subject to disciplinary action if they violate professional or ethical standards. Violations may result in losing their professional license, facing legal consequences, or being sued for malpractice. This professional accountability helps maintain the public’s trust in social work practice and ensures that vulnerable individuals receive the care and support they deserve.

#### **iv. Professional Accountability in Philanthropy**

Professional accountability in philanthropy is often less formalized but is still essential to ensuring that philanthropic activities are transparent, effective, and aligned with ethical principles. Philanthropists are held accountable primarily through financial audits, donor reporting, and impact assessments. Regulatory bodies, such as the IRS in the U.S. and the Charity Commission in the UK, impose reporting requirements that ensure philanthropic organizations are using their funds in compliance with charitable purposes. For example, philanthropic organizations are required to submit detailed financial reports and demonstrate that their activities align with their stated charitable missions. Moreover, philanthropists must also engage in impact assessments to evaluate the effectiveness of their giving. They must ensure that their financial support leads to meaningful and sustainable improvements in the communities they aim to help. According to Donor (2021), “Philanthropists are increasingly held accountable not just for the amount of money they give, but also for the impact that their donations have on long-term social change.” This accountability ensures that philanthropists invest in initiatives that generate measurable results and contribute to the greater good.

Philanthropists are also encouraged to adopt ethical investment strategies that align with social and environmental goals. By considering the long-term impact of their investments, philanthropists can ensure that their actions contribute to sustainable development and support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As Glynn et al. (2020) argue,

“Philanthropists who engage in impact investing ensure that their wealth not only grows but also contributes to creating a better, more sustainable world.” Ethical responsibilities and professional accountability are critical components of both social work and philanthropy. In social work, ethical guidelines ensure that professionals uphold the dignity, rights, and well-being of vulnerable individuals, while professional accountability ensures that social workers are competent, transparent, and adhere to legal and ethical standards. In philanthropy, ethical considerations center on financial integrity, transparency, and the long-term impact of charitable initiatives. While the ethical frameworks governing these fields differ in terms of structure and scope, both social work and philanthropy share a commitment to social justice, empowerment, and the responsible use of resources. Upholding these ethical standards and maintaining professional accountability ensures that both social workers and philanthropists can effectively contribute to the betterment of society.

## **5. Intersection And Distinctions Between Social Work and Philanthropy in Addressing Vulnerable Populations and Their Collective Societal Impact.**

Social work and philanthropy, while distinct in their roles and frameworks, are intertwined in their shared goals of addressing the needs of vulnerable populations and improving overall societal well-being. Each discipline brings unique perspectives, practices, and methodologies, but together, they form a crucial partnership in tackling social challenges. The intersection between social work and philanthropy is evident in the areas where both fields contribute to the lives of individuals, families, and communities, particularly those most at risk. However, understanding their distinctions shaped by legal, ethical, and professional boundaries also highlights the unique ways each discipline functions. In exploring the intersection and distinctions between social work and philanthropy, it is essential to first define the roles and responsibilities that each field plays in addressing vulnerability. Both professions advocate for and work to alleviate suffering among marginalized groups. While social work provides direct support to individuals through counseling, therapy, case management, and advocacy, philanthropy focuses primarily on resource distribution through charitable donations, funding initiatives, and community outreach programs. Despite these differences, social work and philanthropy often operate in tandem, working together to achieve shared goals.

### **i. The Role of Social Work in Addressing Vulnerable Populations**

Social work is rooted in the ethical obligation to uphold human dignity, social justice, and equality. It is guided by a commitment to the welfare of the vulnerable and aims to alleviate suffering caused by social inequality, oppression, and marginalization. Social workers engage in the direct provision of services to individuals and communities facing a range of challenges, such as poverty, homelessness, mental health issues, abuse, addiction, and discrimination. Social workers possess specialized training in human behavior, social systems, and cultural competence, which allows them to address complex, multi-layered issues affecting vulnerable populations. The direct services provided by social workers include emotional and psychological support, crisis intervention, resource advocacy, and long-term case management. Social workers frequently work with children, families, elderly individuals, refugees, and people with disabilities, offering them the support needed to navigate social systems and

overcome barriers to accessing services. In the context of mental health, for example, social workers play an essential role in delivering therapy and counseling services, while also acting as advocates for clients in legal and social systems (Regehr, 2021). They work with clients to identify solutions that promote independence, self-sufficiency, and improved well-being.

A central ethical principle within social work is social justice (NASW, 2021). Social workers advocate for the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, challenging systemic oppression and advocating for marginalized groups. For instance, social workers have been critical in advancing policies that ensure equal access to healthcare, education, and housing for vulnerable populations. In this regard, social workers play an integral role in the policy advocacy that shapes national and international frameworks. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the United States, which guarantees rights for individuals with disabilities, was a significant milestone in advancing social justice for an often-overlooked group. Social workers were involved in the drafting, advocacy, and implementation of the ADA, ensuring that individuals with disabilities had access to education, employment, and public spaces (Leung et al., 2020). Social workers also perform vital community development work, empowering marginalized groups to create positive changes in their own communities. Social workers are trained to assess the needs of a community, engage stakeholders, and facilitate the design and implementation of social programs that address pressing social issues, such as domestic violence, substance abuse, and homelessness. They are central to organizing community-based efforts aimed at raising awareness and building local capacity to address these challenges. In doing so, social workers also align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities), Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), and Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Social workers contribute to these goals by promoting equality, enhancing mental and physical health, and advocating for justice for vulnerable populations (United Nations, 2015).

## **ii. The Role of Philanthropy in Addressing Vulnerable Populations**

In contrast, philanthropy operates from a different framework, often driven by the voluntary contributions of individuals, corporations, and foundations to promote social causes and alleviate poverty, inequality, and suffering. Philanthropists or philanthropic organizations typically focus on providing financial resources to support charitable initiatives and social programs. While philanthropy does not involve the direct service delivery seen in social work, it plays a crucial role in supporting the infrastructure and initiatives that can create systemic change. Philanthropy operates on a larger scale compared to social work, often directing substantial resources toward addressing global issues, such as health disparities, poverty, education, and climate change. The philanthropic sector includes well-established foundations like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which works extensively to address global health challenges, particularly those affecting impoverished populations. Through grants and investments, philanthropic organizations support healthcare programs, educational initiatives, economic empowerment, and other projects aimed at improving the quality of life for vulnerable groups (Glynn et al., 2020). Philanthropy's focus on financial support enables large-scale interventions that social work cannot typically achieve on its own. For instance, philanthropic funds are often used to create or support healthcare infrastructure in regions

lacking adequate services. Global health programs funded by philanthropists have enabled initiatives such as the eradication of polio in parts of the world and the fight against HIV/AIDS (Glynn et al., 2020). These initiatives align with the SDGs, particularly Goal 1 (No Poverty) and Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), and contribute significantly to the reduction of global health inequities. Moreover, philanthropy is also an important tool for advocacy, particularly through funding campaigns that seek to influence public policy. Philanthropic organizations often finance grassroots movements, lobbyists, and policy initiatives that support systemic changes benefiting vulnerable populations. For example, a philanthropic organization might support a campaign to raise awareness of the housing crisis affecting low-income families or fund a legal challenge against discriminatory policies. One important trend in recent philanthropy is impact investing, where investors deliberately seek to achieve positive social outcomes alongside financial returns. This trend reflects a shift from traditional charitable giving to a more strategic, sustainability-focused model of philanthropy. Philanthropic funds are increasingly being used to empower local communities and promote economic independence, particularly in underdeveloped regions. For example, philanthropic funds have been used to support microfinance programs that provide small loans to entrepreneurs in impoverished communities, helping them establish small businesses and create local jobs (Balsinger & Eubanks, 2020).

### **iii. The Intersection Between Social Work and Philanthropy**

While social work and philanthropy differ in their approaches, their goals frequently overlap, especially when it comes to addressing vulnerable populations. The intersection of these fields becomes most evident when social workers collaborate with philanthropic organizations to design, fund, and implement community-based programs. In many instances, philanthropic funding supports social workers' efforts to provide services to marginalized groups. A notable example of this intersection can be found in healthcare. Social workers in community health settings often partner with philanthropic organizations to provide integrated services to individuals living with chronic diseases, mental health conditions, or disabilities. A philanthropic organization may provide the financial backing for a health program, while social workers deliver the essential services to individuals, such as case management, counseling, and support for navigating healthcare systems. This partnership helps ensure that vulnerable populations have access to both the resources and the support they need.

Social workers also contribute to philanthropy through advocacy and policy influence. By working closely with philanthropists, social workers can ensure that charitable initiatives align with the needs of vulnerable populations. For example, when philanthropists provide funds to address homelessness, social workers can offer crucial expertise on how to best allocate those resources, taking into account the complex social, economic, and psychological factors that contribute to homelessness. The collaboration between social workers and philanthropic organizations is also evident in corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. Many companies today engage in philanthropy as part of their CSR programs, providing funds for social causes. In these initiatives, social workers often play a vital role in ensuring that the funds are used effectively and in ways that align with the needs of the communities they serve. For instance, a corporation may donate funds to address hunger or homelessness, and social

workers can help ensure that the funds are directed toward programs that deliver tangible, lasting outcomes. While social work and philanthropy share many intersections, they also maintain distinct roles. Social workers are bound by professional codes of ethics and legal regulations that guide their practice. They are subject to oversight by regulatory bodies and are responsible for ensuring the welfare of individuals through direct service delivery. Philanthropy, on the other hand, operates more independently, with limited professional accountability beyond financial reporting and compliance with charitable laws. This distinction highlights the complementary yet separate roles each field plays in addressing vulnerability and social inequality.

#### **iv. Collective Societal Impact**

When combined, the impact of social work and philanthropy on vulnerable populations is profound and far-reaching. Social workers' direct services, combined with the financial support provided by philanthropists, create a holistic approach to addressing the needs of marginalized groups. Social workers bring their expertise in human behavior, social systems, and advocacy, while philanthropists provide the funding necessary to create and sustain programs that can bring about systemic change. The collective impact of social work and philanthropy is especially evident when it comes to policy reform, community development, and social justice advocacy. Together, these fields contribute to the realization of SDG targets such as ensuring equitable access to education, healthcare, and justice. Their collaboration helps create more sustainable, scalable, and impactful solutions to the complex problems facing vulnerable populations. Through their collective efforts, social work and philanthropy not only improve the well-being of individuals but also contribute to the building of more inclusive, just, and resilient societies. The combination of direct intervention by social workers and the strategic, financial investments of philanthropists creates a synergy that is essential for addressing some of the most pressing social issues of our time.

## **6. Conclusion**

*"The protection of human rights is not simply a moral imperative, but a legal duty binding on all state actors, civil society, and philanthropic entities. As such, those who engage in the provision of social services, whether through direct practice or financial contribution, must operate within a framework that ensures accountability, transparency, and the just treatment of vulnerable populations."*

**– Legal maxim, adapted from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966).**

The intersection of social work and philanthropy in addressing vulnerable populations brings to light the critical importance of both legal and ethical frameworks in safeguarding human rights and promoting social justice. While these two fields are both driven by a shared goal of improving human well-being, their legal and ethical responsibilities diverge in significant ways, reflecting the unique roles they play in the social fabric. The legal principles that underpin social work emphasize the professional, ethical, and accountable delivery of services, while philanthropy, often operating on a larger, resource-driven scale, must adhere to legal structures



that ensure the equitable and responsible distribution of funds to effect systemic change. This paper has explored the legal frameworks that govern social work and philanthropy, demonstrating how these sectors, though distinct, are increasingly interconnected in their efforts to address the needs of vulnerable populations. Social work is fundamentally grounded in legal and ethical mandates, where the social worker's role is defined by a commitment to advocacy, confidentiality, and the protection of human dignity. The social worker's professional obligations are regulated by statutory laws and professional codes of ethics, such as the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics in the United States and similar bodies worldwide. These frameworks obligate practitioners to safeguard the rights of individuals while advocating for systemic reforms aimed at reducing social disparities.

In contrast, the legal governance of philanthropy is more diffuse. Although philanthropic entities are subject to various laws that govern charitable activities, their regulatory oversight is typically focused on transparency, tax status, and ensuring that funds are used for their intended charitable purposes. In many jurisdictions, such as the Charities Act 2011 in the UK and the Internal Revenue Code in the U.S., philanthropic organizations are granted tax-exempt status in exchange for adhering to rules about resource allocation and public benefit. However, the legal accountability of these organizations, particularly in terms of how they engage with vulnerable populations, can sometimes be less rigorous than the mandates faced by social workers. Despite their differing structures and oversight mechanisms, the synergy between social work and philanthropy is critical in advancing social change. Philanthropy, through its financial support, provides the essential resources that enable social work practitioners to design and implement large-scale interventions. Philanthropic entities, however, must recognize the responsibility to ensure that the initiatives they fund are ethical, sustainable, and aligned with the best practices of social work. Legal frameworks and ethical guidelines must intersect to ensure that funds are distributed effectively and that their use is subject to rigorous standards of accountability.

Furthermore, social workers and philanthropists share an overarching duty to address the root causes of vulnerability. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, provide a universal blueprint for tackling the interconnected issues of poverty, inequality, and injustice, which are the primary focus of both social work and philanthropy. As part of their professional and ethical responsibilities, social workers are obligated to advocate for policies and practices that advance these global goals. Similarly, philanthropic organizations must prioritize funding programs that contribute to the SDGs, ensuring that their resources are directed toward the most pressing social issues. Nevertheless, the practical intersection of social work and philanthropy does present several challenges, particularly in relation to legal and ethical accountability. Social workers are bound by a strict ethical code that ensures the protection of individuals and communities, a code that often places their professional responsibility above any external financial interest. Philanthropists, however, may at times prioritize financial efficiency over social impact, resulting in programs that fail to address the systemic causes of vulnerability or, worse, exacerbate inequalities. The absence of a coherent, shared set of standards between social work and philanthropy can result in a lack of coordination, resource inefficiencies, and a failure to fully understand or meet the needs of

vulnerable populations.

## 7. Recommendations

- i. **Strengthen Cross-Sector Collaboration:** A key recommendation is the development of stronger partnerships between social workers and philanthropic organizations. Philanthropists should engage with social work professionals to ensure that funding is directed toward evidence-based, community-driven interventions that have proven success in alleviating vulnerability. By doing so, philanthropists can increase the impact of their investments while social workers can access the resources necessary to enhance their services.
- ii. **Align Ethical Standards Across Sectors:** There is a critical need for the alignment of ethical standards between social work and philanthropy. The establishment of joint ethical guidelines would allow both sectors to operate in a more cohesive manner, ensuring that their work complements rather than competes. These standards should address key areas such as transparency, accountability, and the ethical distribution of resources, ensuring that philanthropic funds are used in ways that truly benefit vulnerable populations.
- iii. **Enhance Legal Oversight and Accountability:** Governments should play an active role in ensuring that philanthropic organizations operate within legal parameters that guarantee ethical conduct. This might involve establishing clearer regulatory guidelines for philanthropy, especially in how funds are allocated to vulnerable populations. Strengthening oversight mechanisms would hold philanthropic organizations accountable, ensuring that they adhere to the principles of social justice and equity.
- iv. **Focus on Long-Term Impact:** Philanthropy should prioritize funding that addresses long-term structural issues rather than short-term, symptomatic solutions. Both social workers and philanthropists should collaborate on initiatives that promote sustainable community development, build local capacity, and focus on systemic change. By investing in empowerment, education, and economic development, philanthropists can help create lasting solutions that do not merely alleviate the immediate consequences of poverty or inequality but also contribute to its eradication.
- v. **Utilize Intersectional Approaches:** Social work and philanthropy should adopt an intersectional lens when addressing the needs of vulnerable populations. Intersectionality considers the multiple and overlapping factors, such as race, gender, disability, and class, that contribute to individuals' experiences of vulnerability. Social workers and philanthropists should work together to design programs that recognize and address these complexities, ensuring that interventions are tailored to the specific needs of diverse groups.

In conclusion, the legal, ethical, and professional interplay between social work and philanthropy is fundamental to advancing social justice and addressing the needs of vulnerable populations. By strengthening collaboration, aligning ethical standards, and enhancing legal accountability, both sectors can achieve a more profound and lasting impact. It is through the

effective synergy of social work and philanthropy, governed by clear legal frameworks and ethical principles, that society can truly fulfill its duty to protect and empower its most vulnerable members.

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