Creating SPACE: A Conceptual Framework
for Rights-Based International Social Work and Social Development

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Abstract: *Escalating conflicts, climate change, rising inequality, a global pandemic: Complex emergencies are leading to a reconfiguration of the world as we know it. Rapid flow of information allows increased visibility and understanding of the impact of these crises on the most vulnerable. Yet at the same time, marginalized communities are rendered invisible, and their fundamental human rights are being erased. In such contexts, providing a framework that engages communities and ensures that they are at the core of any capacity building endeavor is an important professional mandate for international social work and social development. This paper introduces the Strengths and Participation to Accomplish Capacity and Empowerment (SPACE) conceptual framework for capacity building and community engagement in international social work practice. This conceptual framework builds on both the strengths perspective and empowerment theories, and promotes a rights-based approach for international social work and social development. SPACE was first used to design and implement a training-of-trainers program in two communities in Guatemala. The training's effectiveness in building capacity was evidenced by the impactful networks strengthened or developed as a result of the training in developing COVID-related responses. Further applications of this framework can improve international social work practice and advance rights-based approaches to sustainable development.*

Keywords: *Capacity building; empowerment; international social work; human rights; international social development; training of trainers*

Complex Problems and the Need for Innovative, Interdisciplinary Solutions

Global issues, including poverty, hunger, and food insecurity (Action Against Hunger, 2020; Roser & Ritchie, 2013); armed conflicts (Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, 2020); increasingly complex manifestations of violence (World Bank, 2019; WHO, 2020a); raging inequality between and within countries and regions (UN News, 2021; environmental hazards (World Economic Forum, 2020); and global health crises and pandemics (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020b) create complex challenges for policy makers and service providers and increase communities' vulnerability through further marginalization and exclusion. These global issues function as adverse drivers, forcing people out of their communities and affecting large scale internal and international displacement. Over 82 million people are displaced worldwide, of which over 26 million are refugees, 48 million are internally displaced people, and 4.1 million are asylum seekers, while another 3.9 million are Venezuelans displaced abroad (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2021).

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On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, creating further havoc and exacerbating many ongoing global crises. Almost two years later, as of January 26, 2022, there are 356,955,803 confirmed cases worldwide, and a staggering 5,610,291 deaths (WHO, 2022). The economic, social, and political implications are further exacerbated in the context of rising nationalism and xenophobia (Engelken-Jorge, 2017), and pre-existing fragile social, economic, and political institutions.

At the individual and community level, mental health challenges are rapidly increasing\ as a manifestation of the deeper-level impact of chronic structural problems (Parks & Thalheimer, 2020). Lack of access to adequate health care in general, and to mental health care by qualified/trained professionals in particular, leads to alarming deterioration in the mental health of the people and communities most affected by these issues. Recent studies show rising rates of suicidal ideation and behavior across age groups (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2018; WHO, 2020b), as well as increased rates of depression and anxiety (Global Burden of Disease [GBD], 2018 WHO, 2020b).

The increasing complexity and the compounding of multiple global issues leading to protracted crises and complex emergencies (International Rescue Committee, 2021) stress the need to adopt a global perspective. Since 2015, three global frameworks were developed and introduced, providing innovative, interdisciplinary and transnational, integrated solutions. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG; 2015-2030) provide a global strategy to address 16 interrelated issues using collaborations and partnerships to improve communities' wellbeing. The Global Compacts on Safe Migration (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2019) and on Refugees (UNHCR, 2018) propose multi-level strategies to address the adverse drivers leading to displacement and forced migration. Such frameworks provide a blueprint for engaging nation states in a collaborative effort to address these issues through active partnership with different representatives of the Civil Society (CS), including professional groups historically working at the intersection of governments, international organizations, and local communities.

Social work is a global profession that is anchored in local contexts to engage local communities. Its core professional competencies and a well-rounded rights-based international code of ethics (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2018) position social work at the forefront of addressing some of these issues by developing and piloting innovative solutions to many of the complex problems affecting local communities in diverse international settings. Three key elements are fundamental for such international social work initiatives to be effective:

1) *Interdisciplinarity* – working across disciplines to address the multiple facets of a complex problem;
2) *Community Participation* – working across communities and power divides to empower local communities to be the engine of any intervention or project; and,
3) *Sustainability* - incorporating programmatic *leverage* to influence lasting outcomes in terms of skills, resources, and/or structures (Alexander et al., 2003; Hacker et al., 2012; Lennox et al., 2018).

These three elements align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) framework allowing for multiple perspectives and multi-level interventions to create sustainable solutions grounded in local capacity.

The SDG framework engages multiple levels to develop, implement, and measure global strategies for addressing current complex issues. To ensure sustainability, we need to closely engage communities and contextualize responses based on the existing capacity at the community level. This paper introduces a conceptual framework, SPACE (Strengths and Participation for Achieving Capacity and Empowerment) for community-based capacity building, addressing the complex problems facing highly vulnerable communities. SPACE was designed to provide the context for community-based intervention in communities facing multiple social issues. The initial application of the model focused on community and family violence and specific mental health issues contributing to suicide, particularly amongst highly vulnerable groups such as children/youth and women in an international setting. The model is anchored in social capital theories (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988); empowerment theories (Adams, 2008); the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2013), and the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2020; Sen, 1985, 2005). The guiding principles are core human rights principles: universality; indivisibility; non-discrimination; participation; and accountability (Androff, 2015; Mapp et al., 2019; United Nations Sustainable Development Group [UNSDG], n.d.).

Three issues within this framework will be discussed: the main factors contributing to the development and implementation of the model; the effectiveness of a training-of-trainers (TOT) approach to building capacity at the community level; and the importance of network development in ensuring the continuity and sustainability of the model. We present an application of the model in building capacity for two highly vulnerable communities in urban areas in Guatemala, and explore how the SPACE framework contributes to addressing some of the limitations inherent to TOT. We discuss the implications of this model for strengthening partnerships between professionals and community members and between higher education institutions and nongovernmental organizations at a global level and in local communities. Implications for international social work are also explored.

Creating SPACE: A Conceptual Framework for Capacity Building

Two main theories were used in developing the SPACE framework: Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988;) and the Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2020; Sen, 1985, 2005), focusing on capacity building from the micro to the macro levels of intervention. Based on these theories, communities actively participate in an initial capacity mapping, identifying specific resources within their midst, as well as resources they could access through existing local networks (*assessing social capital*). The Capabilities Approach engages communities in a systemic thought process focused on multiple levels of well-being and proceeds to collaboratively define specific capabilities they have and need to expand or enhance to effectively address the challenges they identify (Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2020).

Building on social capital theories and the capabilities approach, the SPACE framework is grounded in the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2013; Willetts et al., 2014) and empowerment theories (Adams, 2008), the foundations of social work practice. Furthermore, SPACE follows basic human rights principles, promoting inclusion and maximization of choice at individual and community levels through policies and programs that recognize community capacity as an asset.

Figure 1: *The SPACE Conceptual Framework – Building capacity through participation within a human rights paradigm*
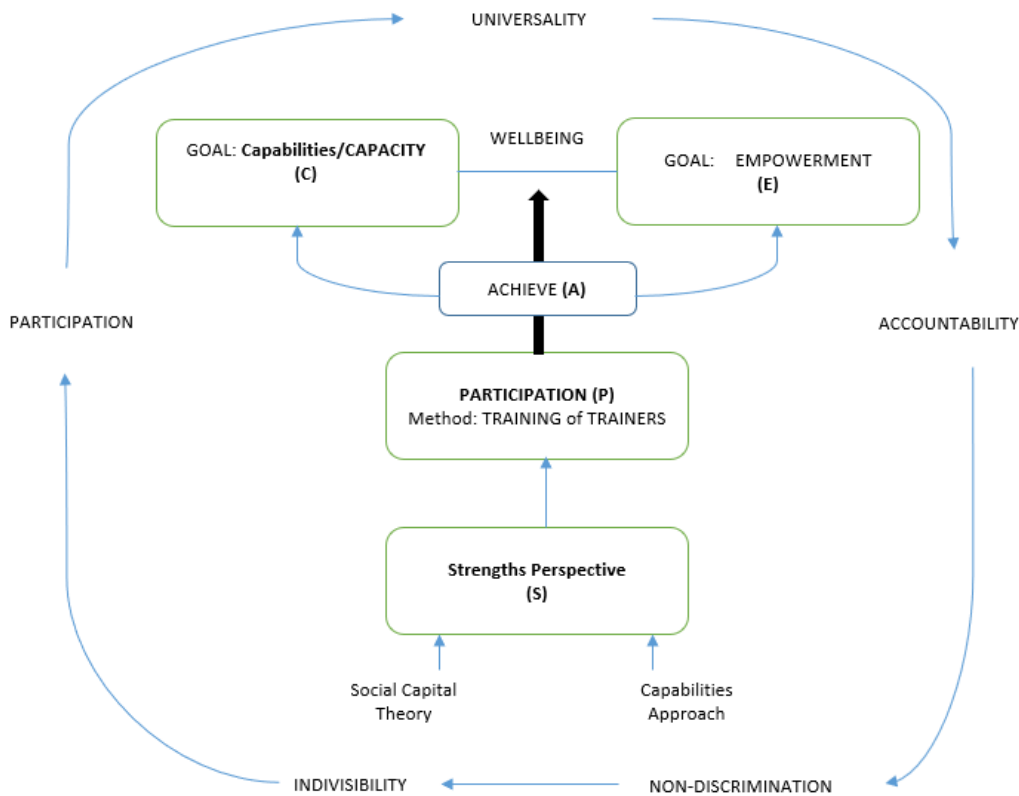
The SPACE framework builds on and expands Kam's EPS model (Empowerment, Participation, and Strengths) that integrated the strengths perspective as a theoretical basis with empowerment as a goal, using participation as the method. While the EPS model was primarily applied to build capacity in an urban setting for older adults (Kam, 2020), the SPACE conceptual framework expands this model to highly vulnerable communities, maintaining the strengths perspective as the theoretical basis, grounded in social capital and the capabilities approach. The SPACE framework shifts the ultimate goal to community capacity building. Empowerment of communities, through the transfer of knowledge and skills from trainers to trainees is a goal depending on the achievement of full capabilities at both individual and community levels. Participation is the underlying

principle determining the selection of specific methods and focused on engaging the community in shaping the capacity-building process. The model is fully anchored in a human rights paradigm and its guiding principles (see Figure 1)

The Training-of-Trainers Method and Its Use in International Social Work

The training-of-trainers (TOT) method was chosen as the main tool for the participatory capacity building, to create the professional expertise needed to equip communities to address identified *wicked problems* (Davidson, 2017), defined as complex problems that are difficult to approach and that require innovative multi-level intervention strategies. TOT is currently used in international development for capacity building as an empowerment tool contributing to sustainable best practices (Mormina & Pinder, 2018). Focused on training local professionals or community members to become trainers and expanding access to knowledge and skills in local contexts, TOT methods aim to counter widespread neocolonial approaches utilizing Western knowledge and experts to dictate the response to global development challenges. TOT contributes to building local capacity and thus reducing the dependency of local communities on international "experts" which are limited by reliance on and restricted understanding of their own cultural, social, and economic contexts.

However, based on the authors' collective experiences, there are a few challenges with the TOT method that are particularly relevant in the context of international social work: 1) the potential unidirectional transfer of knowledge, often based on a lack of intentional participatory methods used in the training; 2) the inconsistent participation of trainees in all aspects of the training process; 3) the lack of continuity and wastage of capacity, mostly linked to the inconsistent dissemination of knowledge and skills by participants and limited follow-up trainings; and, 4) the lack of fidelity in transferring the knowledge/disseminating the curriculum based on its initial adaptations for the communities' needs. The proposed conceptual framework attempts to address these challenges in a number of critical ways including: adding participation as the core principle and approach; developing training materials as a resource for all participants; incorporating participants' feedback in the training materials; providing follow-up web-based discussions, support, and feedback (to address any attendance/engagement issues); focusing on empowerment through network development (thus, facilitating ongoing collaboration between participants in the delivery/dissemination of knowledge and skills); and, creating mechanisms that facilitate the review/adaptation of training curriculum based on emerging needs in the participant communities. The networks facilitated and or/developed as a result of the capacity-building projects are thus positioned to serve as an important resource in ensuring sustainability of capacity beyond the life of the project.

Rights-Based Approach - Core Guiding Principles in Creating SPACE

The shift from a needs-based to a rights-based approach is essential for any capacity building endeavor, as it allows us to start with a recognition of our shared humanity and build capacity to promote human dignity and worth which are at the core of the social work

profession (Mapp et al., 2019). A human rights paradigm is therefore the most appropriate framework for capacity building and sustainable community development.

To adequately claim and protect human rights, we need to apply the core principles of a human rights paradigm to frame international development practices, in general, and community interventions and social work practice, in particular. Such an approach emphasizes the role of social work education in training professionals to work within a human rights paradigm, beyond national borders and prerogatives, with a focus on individuals and communities as immediate participants in development and change processes (UNSDG, n.d.).

The first human rights principle we need to consider is *universality* (UNSDG, n.d.): fundamental human rights apply to ALL people on the virtue of being human. It is this principle that supports the TOT as the core method, as it maximizes access to better assessment and intervention tools. By facilitating access to professional development and achievement of full capabilities across local communities, we maximize choice and expand capacity, thus empowering communities.

Accountability is the next human rights principle (UNSDG, n.d.) and is used to maximize capacity building by creating ownership at the community level, and identifying the mechanisms needed to ensure accountability at all levels. Participants learn from each other through purposeful group activities and shared knowledge, engaging in interactive learning processes, and valuing each individual experience and perspective. They identify ways in which they can hold each other accountable to best apply acquired knowledge and skills to improve the lives of the communities in which they live and serve. At the same time, participants are empowered to hold trainers accountable to respecting the views of the community and respond to feedback and recommendations provided by the community.

Non-discrimination is the next guiding human rights principle (UNSDG, n.d.), with an emphasis on inclusive approaches: purposefully engaging all community members (intentional participation mechanisms*)*, and ensuring that no voices are excluded. To address non-discrimination the SPACE framework promotes equal access to community trainings and purposefully engages community leaders to identify barriers to participation, and contribute to developing training methods that will promote inclusion.

Indivisibility of human rights is essential to consider for any interdisciplinary approach reframing the complex problems affecting communities as violations of human rights. It is not the violation of a single right that is reflected in these problems, but rather a constellation of rights that need to be addressed concurrently to provide an effective solution. Through the recognition and subsequent application of the indivisibility principle (UNSDG, n.d.), international social work can shift away from a needs-based/deprivation model and move towards a rights-based approach that operationalizes needs as barriers/obstacles that must be removed to fully protect and realize specific rights. A hallmark of the SPACE framework--achievement of capabilities--can only be realized through shifting the paradigm and claiming/protecting community rights.

Participation is the core principle in the SPACE framework. The TOT, as its main tool, contributes to the goal of expanding capacity by disseminating shared knowledge. Fully

informed by social capital theories, the SPACE framework promotes network development to ensure diverse participation in all stages of training and capacity building. Social workers become mentors for youth and social work students, engaging with them to support existing networks and to develop new networks of care. Teachers and practitioners engage with youth to learn from them what needs to be addressed through the trainings provided and then use this knowledge to adapt and improve training materials.

The SPACE conceptual framework is anchored in the human rights paradigm to fully engage communities, recognize and support them in achieving their capabilities, and empower them to guide the interventions (from development to implementation and evaluation), and claim their rights. Community members are rights-holders that actively engage each other, as well as other networks to maximize access to resources, and protect and realize the rights of each community constituent. The limitations of TOT programs identified in the literature, as noted above, are directly addressed by the SPACE conceptual framework: guided by human rights principles, it intentionally engages community members in a participatory training process aimed at strengthening existing capacity, fostering community wellbeing, and building sustainable networks to approach complex problems and participate in developing and implementing effective solutions.

Applying the SPACE Framework for Capacity Building: Guatemala Case Study

Country Characteristics

Guatemala is a Central Latin-American country that is part of the turbulent Northern Triangle (Cheatham, 2021). The country faces multiple complex problems that directly affect communities throughout Guatemala including: 1) displacement, disappearances and mass fatalities following the 36-year armed conflict (1960-1996) in which over 200,000 people either disappeared or were killed (Sanford, 2003); 2) poverty (disproportionately affecting people in rural areas, indigenous groups, and women and children) with Guatemala having the 2nd highest poverty rate in the Americas, with approximately half of the population, and up to 79% of all indigenous people living under the poverty line (The Borgen Project, 2020; World Bank, 2020); 3) violence, ranging from family violence and violence against women to street and gang violence (Alvarado & Massey, 2010; Branas et al., 2013; Ogrodnik & Borzutzky, 2011; Speizer et al., 2008); and 4) increasing mental health issues, with rising suicide rates among children and youth (Branas et al., 2013; Pengpid & Peltzer, 2019; Puac-Polanco et al., 2015). Highly vulnerable communities in and around Guatemala City, characterized by rampant gang violence and drug trafficking, contributing to high instability, are categorized as *Red Zone Districts* (RZD). The RZDs rates of poverty, crime, gender-based violence (GBV) and community violence are the highest in Latin America and among the highest in the world (Alonzo et al., 2021; Gerkin, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020; Puac-Polanco et al., 2015; Wilson, 2020).

The Guatemalan government is subjected to international pressures, following decades of complex geopolitical dynamics, with the United States heavily involved in addressing (or contributing to) the complex issues affecting Central and South America in general,

and the Northern Triangle countries, in particular (Cheatham, 2021). The professional capacity in the country, particularly for caring professions (social work, psychology, health care) is scarce, and the socio-economic context limits access to health and social services (Gragnolati & Marini, 2003). The state of mental health in Guatemala is another major issue of concern, with approximately 1 in 4 Guatemalans experiencing a mental illness in their lifetime (Branas et al., 2013), and only 2-15% of those with a mental illness being able to access needed psychiatric treatment (Puac Pulanco et al, 2015; Rissman et al., 2016). Previous studies indicate prevalence rates of 40.7% for depression, 23.3% for alcohol-related disorders, and 50% for PTSD (Branas et al., 2013). Rates are even higher among particularly vulnerable groups such as women, indigenous groups, those directly affected by the country's 36-year armed conflict and the urban poor residing in communities such as RZDs (Mercier, 2020; Schwartz, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic added new levels of complexity to the existing problems (Action Against Hunger, 2020). Since the start of the pandemic, Guatemala's economic indexes sharply decreased, leading to over half a million job losses and an exacerbated food crisis, with over 1.2 million people in need of food aid by June, 2020, doubling the number since the beginning of the year (Action Against Hunger, 2020). The added burden on an already weak health care system (with resources being shifted from maternal and child care to COVID-related care), as well as the loss of remittances and the forced returns of Guatemalan people from the United States, including unaccompanied minors, increased the sense of loss and despair, leaving communities with little resources or hope (Action Against Hunger, 2020).

Guatemala has a predominantly young population, with over half of the total population under the age of 18 (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2019; Pan American Health Organization [PAHO], 2017). This is an element of capacity, taking into account that a young population is usually more amenable to change and more prone to innovation if adequate resources are provided. Psychology and social work programs are provided by multiple higher education institutions (HEI) in Guatemala, yet only one university is a public university, which further marginalizes the majority of the population, limiting their access to higher education. Among the private HEI, two of the universities in Guatemala City cater to lower-income youth by providing scholarships. They provide psychology and social work training to students with roots and/or direct interests in the more highly vulnerable communities.

The civil society in Guatemala depends greatly on the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), often with international representation, that engage with communities and provide access to much needed resources. School participation in local decision-making is affected by the multiple issues hurting local communities and by a chronic lack of resources. Therefore, it is the NGOs, with their staff and volunteers, that work to address these issues where governmental programs do not have a presence. Teachers and other school personnel also rely on NGOs to provide additional training on issues they are not prepared for, such as suicide assessment and intervention, violence prevention, and community-school partnership programs (Carter, 2012).

Applying the SPACE Framework to Developing a TOT in Guatemala

Applying the SPACE conceptual framework, we adapted a TOT model to design a capacity building project focused on two RZD communities in Guatemala. The model was anchored in a capacity mapping conducted with key stakeholders in these communities that identified *existing problems* (problems affecting the communities for a longer period of time; *triggering problems* (escalating issues identified by key stakeholders as leading to current concerns); and *resources* (existing capacity/community assets).

Community #1: Peronia

Peronia is a vibrant community consisting of 12 separate districts representing an urban sprawl of Guatemala City. A microcosm of the country, Peronia reflects its high levels of poverty. It is the third most densely populated city in Central America, with a very young population – 76% being younger than 35 (Merriman, 2020). According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020), literacy rates in the country reflect a significant gap between women and men, with the overall literacy rates for women being approximately ten percentage points lower than for men. The differences are starker in poor communities, with over 90% of children living in poverty and never graduating high school (Guatemala Literacy Project, 2020). For indigenous communities, the literacy rates are significantly lower, with 33% of people in these communities being completely illiterate (idem). The community is impacted by gang violence, a wide-spread issue in Guatemala particularly affecting urban areas (Winton, 2004); as well as an increasing exodus, with people migrating towards the United States, in an attempt to escape gang violence and gender-based violence (Smith, 2020) [*existing problems*]. Schools are faced with teen pregnancy (Wulfhorst, 2017), street and family violence, delinquency (Overseas Security Advisory Council, 2020), and a recent sharp increase in youth suicide rates (Pengpid & Peltzer, 2019) [*triggering problems*].

In this community, the natural partner was an elementary school [*resource*], that aims to prepare its teachers and staff [*resource*] to address some of these ongoing challenges by developing and growing its social capital; engaging with local capacity [*resource*], particularly in regards to social care; and creating interdisciplinary teams (psychologist, administrators, and teachers) that will be able to assess and respond to identified suicide risks.

Community #2: El Limon

El Limon is a community at the outskirts of Guatemala City, with high poverty rates and violence, particularly gang-related violence (Black Beans & Bitterballen, 2017; Fieser, 2010) affecting its youth [*existing problems*]. Due to the high prevalence of violent behaviors and the risk of harm and self-harm among children and youth in this community [*triggering problems*], multiple health care providers and youth-centered organizations are present in the community [*resource*]. From a social capital perspective, the community capacity is high, yet not fully capitalized due to high levels of instability

[*challenge/triggering problem*]. In this community, the mental health care providers [*resource*] were the main partners bringing the community together.

The common threads between these two communities and the pillars on which this model was built are:

- Shared current issues and triggering issues;
- A focus on increasing visibility and capacity of the social work profession locally through active international support provided by International Social Work Solutions;
- Local leadership provided by Hunger Relief International, an international NGO very engaged with the local communities;
- Initiated partnership with social work educators facilitated by International Social Work Solutions [ISWS]; and,
- Identified youth leaders and an emergent network of professionals focusing on core social issues (see Figure 2).

Initial capacity mapping identified and validated several common issues, including community and family violence, as well as depression and suicidality, particularly among preteens and teens (ages 11-19). The common points of intersection concerning these immediate challenges allowed participants (teachers and school administrators in Peronia, and mental health care providers, community health care providers, youth leaders, and social workers in El Limon – see Alonzo et al., 2020) to discuss the impact of these issues on education and development and related long-term implications. These common issues were used to guide their strategic planning work and establish how to use and expand existing networks to have a deeper impact and improve outcomes for their communities, particularly concerning health and mental health.

Applying the SPACE framework, the work was anchored in the identified community capacity (professionals and community members in the two communities), using a participatory training-of-trainers focusing on assessment, prevention and intervention on family violence, community violence, and mental health issues. By training community health care providers, professionals, and youth leaders in the two communities, we provided support to the target communities in achieving a level of capacity that will equip them to address problems they identified in their communities. The goal was to empower the participants through providing needed knowledge and skills, and strengthening and expanding existing networks, thus improving the overall wellbeing of all community members. The TOT engaged the community, inviting participants' contribution to developing community-centered strategies to assess risks, identify protective factors, disseminate knowledge, and develop core networks allowing for sustainability of the model. The observed increased capacity as an immediate outcome of the TOT (Alonzo et al., 2020) was linked to the identification and connection of existing networks of care that later became a key resource in addressing the added problems raised by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The core human rights principles were anchoring the development and dissemination of the TOT. The training-of-trainers followed the universality and non-discrimination

principles by engaging all interested participants to address community and family violence and mental illness as risk factors for suicide, while focusing on developing strong support networks as protective factors for at-risk youth. As human rights are indivisible*,* the right to life, health and mental health care, family, safety, as well as fair representation and free associations are the main rights scaffolding the approach. Literacy, access to education, and other economic opportunities are seen as protective factors, leading to a comprehensive strategy that aims to address micro, mezzo, and macro level stressors to lower suicide risks among children and youth. The engagement of multiple stakeholders followed the participation principle. Continuity and sustainability of capacity building was facilitated through the development of an additional network of support including social work educators, international organizations, and local NGOs that initiated the TOT. Training materials were developed and provided for the newly trained professionals to support their work in continuing to empower local communities through training and specialized interventions. Rather than proposing a traditional, manualized approach which is controlled by developers, often outsiders to the communities they train, the SPACE framework facilitated the development of training materials that continue to grow and adapt as needs and contexts change, under the leadership and ownership of community representatives.

Accountability was intentionally built into the model through regular meetings, shared reports, and consultations on current challenges with the training materials participants use and disseminate, and the interventions they are working to develop. The trainers and partner organizations were accountable to the community in providing timely responses, integrating changes to training materials based on participants' feedback, and organizing follow-up sessions to observe and respond to trainings planned and delivered to local communities. While the follow-up sessions schedule was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the accountability structures were integrated throughout the implementation of the model.

Implications for International Social Development and Social Work Practice

The SPACE conceptual framework addresses the weaknesses and limitations of both empowerment theory and the strengths perspective raised by Kam in the development of the EPS model, (Kam, 2020), particularly in regard to the hegemony inherent in Western approaches to community development and capacity building, resolving the *empowerment paradox* (Adams, 2008). The use of the strengths perspective within a human rights paradigm shifts focus to the community, recognizing its capacity, and engaging with community members to develop and implement capacity building tools that make sense for their own understanding of the complex problems they are faced with. This framework highlights the importance of a rights-based approach for community interventions in an international context of practice, and prepares social workers to adapt existing capacity building tools through participatory approaches leading to community-driven responses to complex global issues.

Figure 2. *Stakeholder Mapping in the TOT in Guatemala – Using the SPACE Framework*
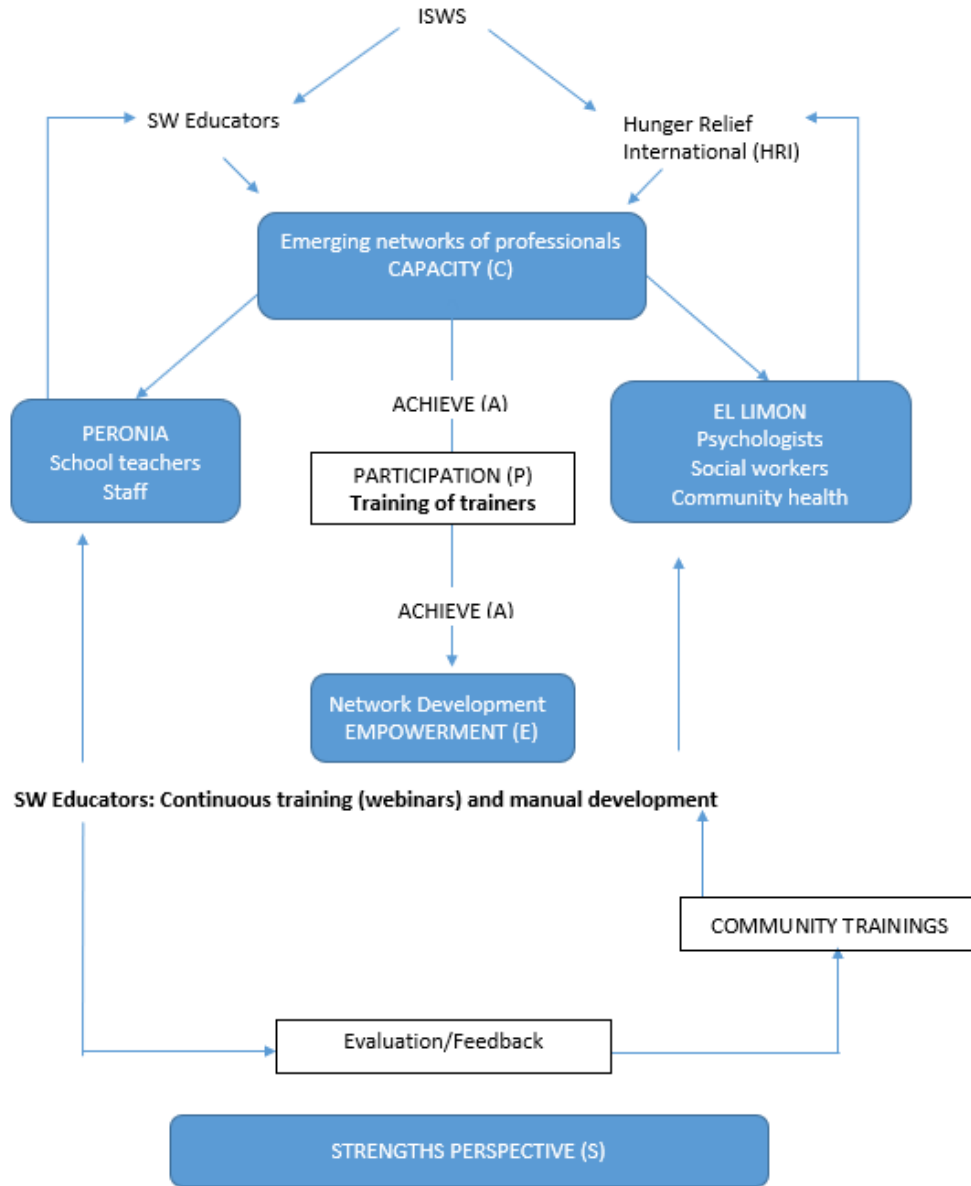
By using participation as the core principle of the SPACE framework, the TOT we developed fully involves the community and transfers training capacity to the trainees. The achievement of full capabilities/capacity as one of the primary goals becomes instrumental in empowering the community to take ownership of the sustainable solutions they design. In Guatemala, that was exemplified by the full engagement of community members in using existing networks (as presented in Figure 2) and developing new networks by connecting training participants to relevant groups, to improve responses and outcomes.

This level of community engagement will support dissemination of information and create local leadership. Social workers and mental health care providers are actively engaged in these networks, either through participation in the training, or through newly established connections with schools of social work and psychology in two local universities, an indicator of increased professional local capacity (Alonzo et al., 2020).

The grounding of the model in core human rights principles also shifted the focus from the training itself (sole formation of professionals, through the transfer of specific knowledge and skills) to the role this training plays in maximizing the choices of trainees in regards to problem definition, intervention tools, and desired outcomes/measures of success. Ultimately, creating a rights-based SPACE is about facilitating the development and growth of networks of care that either existed prior to the training or were formed as a result of the training. It is such networks that bring community participants together, empowering them to frame the curriculum through their own lenses and transfer knowledge and skills in their own communities. SPACE works across professional disciplines to engage all relevant stakeholders, creating spaces for growth and increasing community capacity.

Despite the advantages of the SPACE framework, a few limitations need to be acknowledged:

(1) The model was only tested in the specific context of the two highly vulnerable communities in Guatemal; and the only participatory approach employed was the TOT. To increase its applicability, the model needs to continue to be applied in different contexts, and possibly using alternative participatory approaches.

(2) Further testing of the model and its impact on sustainable capacity building is needed. We did schedule a follow-up that would have focused on the application of skills by newly trained participants in training other community members, yet due to the COVID-19 pandemic it was postponed. The follow-up session would have provided us with important data on the effectiveness of the TOT in preparing participants to train other community members following the participatory approaches prescribed by the model.

(3) Further exploration is needed on the impact of the intervention (TOT) on network development, as an important indicator of increased participation, increased community engagement, and sustainability. Such data will allow us to refine and improve this model.

Despite these limitations, in the context of a global pandemic, exacerbating all existing problems and depleting already scarce resources, the SPACE framework can be an effective framework for developing interdisciplinary, sustainable solutions. On one hand, this is a framework that builds on core premises of international social work education, stressing the importance of starting where the people are, and using a holistic approach to engage relevant stakeholders at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice. On the other hand, the model transcends social work education, providing an effective rights-based sustainable development framework. This framework does create SPACE for safe, brave,

and sustainable solutions, with communities at the core and at the lead. Further research on the applications of this framework in international social work practice and social development should explore ways in which the interdisciplinarity and participatory approach can improve practice in international settings and advance rights-based approaches to sustainable development, ultimately facilitating community-driven solutions and increasing community wellbeing.

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