

## **SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIAL WORK ASSOCIATIONS TOGETHER LAUNCH NATIONAL SOCIAL WORKERS' ASSOCIATION (SOUTH AFRICA)**

Apartheid cast a long shadow over South Africa's associations of social workers. Last week saw a historic 'Lekgotla' - a gathering of South African social workers in Johannesburg - finally consign racially separated social work associations to history. Of course for 15 years the former white, black and coloured associations had been multi racial in their constitution but in practice they served different constituencies. For example the South African Black Social Workers Association dropped black from its title but kept the acronym SABSWA!

Over 600 social workers from across South Africa voted to establish the **National Social Workers' Association (South Africa)**, merging four professional associations. The move comes at a critical time for social work in South Africa. There are currently 11,000 social workers but the Government estimates another 16000 will be needed to implement the new Children Act. The Government has dramatically increased funding for social work education, doubling the members in training next year.

More controversially it has signed a deal with Cuba to train 900 social work auxiliaries. Fears that this represented a "dumbing down" of social work were acknowledged by Dr Jean Swanson Jacobs, the Deputy Minister of Social Development, who sought to reassure delegates that the scheme was targeted at unemployed South African youth. The aim is to train young people to work in their communities with orphans and vulnerable children and with families affected by HIV/Aids. Dr Jacobs attacked the brain drain of social workers leaving the country to work elsewhere for higher salaries. South Africa could not afford to lose its most talented social workers trained in the country to work overseas. She called for Commonwealth protocols to govern the recruitment agencies operating in South Africa.

Despite the recent promises of investment, morale among social workers in South Africa has been low with poor working conditions, low salaries and anxiety about their status. The formation of a unified social worker association is seen as a major step forward in international recognition.

South Africa was expelled from the International Federation of Social Workers in 1982 because of its racially divided associations. IFWW representatives at the Lekgotla, Charles Mbugua Senior Vice President and Terry Bamford welcomed the historic decision. "This is a great day for social work in Africa" said Charles Mbugua.

Professor Vishanthie Sewpaul was elected President of the new association from an initial field of 37 candidates, reflecting the huge enthusiasm of delegates who broke into spontaneous song at times in the lekgotla.

Terry Bamford (IFSW Representative to the social work Lekgotla)  
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