

World Social Work Day
Keynote Speech
April 26th 2017, UN Bangkok Office

Mariko Kimura, Ph.D.
IFSW Vice President
IFSW-AP Regional President
Professor, Japan Women's University

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to this social work related event. Thank you for gathering on this occasion to celebrate World Social Work Day.

First, I would like to express my appreciation to His Excellency, the Minister of Social Development and other distinguished guest, as well as to corporate members, fellow social workers, and social work students. I am truly grateful for your presence.

I am most delighted to be able to celebrate World Social Work Day 2017 together with Thai social workers here at the United Nations Regional Office in Bangkok.

The social work profession is growing all around the world. Our profession is clearly contributing to individual and social change. We are confident in the difference our work makes and the significance for joining professional organizations is becoming stronger.

The International Federation of Social Workers has now 124 country members while more and more countries are planning to join us. The celebration of World Social Work Day is a testament to the international unity of professional associations. In 2017, social workers all over the world are engaged in 'Promoting Community and Environmental Sustainability', the current theme of the *Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development*. For us social workers, World Social Work Day events such as this provide an opportunity to deliver the fundamental message of *sustainability* to national governments. This is also a symbolic day when we make an appeal to promote this goal in solidarity and cooperation with other sectors too.

It is very important for us at the International Federation of Social Workers to work together with the United Nations. Also, we are extremely pleased that in addition to New York and Geneva, a new social work team has formed in Thailand at the Bangkok office and is hosting this event today. To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, there is a need to strengthen our stance for collaboration between all social workers and UN agencies. It is difficult for every agency and profession to change the workings of poverty and marginalization if they stand alone.

Social workers have expertise in assisting communities to take the lead in their own development. We must leave behind the previous paradigm of 'aid' in community development and support. Instead, we should make 'development and empowerment' the new tasks of the profession and proceed accordingly.

I sincerely hope that this forum at the United Nations serves as a clear beacon for the three million social workers worldwide who are members of and represented by IFSW. I strongly wish for today to be a good opportunity to reaffirm the understanding that by working in collaboration with UN strategies, professionals and professional organizations can utilize their power and potential to advance those goals that social work shares with the United Nations.

Now, I would like to turn to the base of our activities, namely the Asia Pacific Region. Many reports by the United Nations and other actors show the following characteristics of our region.

While the Asia Pacific is a vast region expanding to both the Northern and Southern hemispheres, its climate ranges from tropical to arctic. Furthermore, it is home to many different types of natural environment from high mountains to coral reefs. This region is recently the place of rapid demographic and economic changes. The progress of population growth, concentration to urban areas, and economic growth pose problems for the natural environment, as well as peoples living environment.

When considering measures for environmental problems for instance in the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, it is most important to keep in mind these regional features. Our region's diverse characteristics have a deep impact on the social problems that social work is strongly involved with and on community conditions too. The characteristics of the Asia Pacific Region include the following keywords: geographic *remoteness*, political and cultural *diversity*, environmental *vulnerability*, *internationality* in an economic-social-environmental sense, and ultimately *poverty* (Nomura & Abe, 2009).

These characteristic interfere with the sharing of information and experience between countries and sub-regions, while they also act as a factor for higher administrative and infrastructural costs. 'Diversity'; for example the South Pacific sub-region alone is inhabited by approximately seven million people who speak over two thousand languages. To achieve sustainable development in our region, it is crucial to respect such cultural-social-political diversity and pay close attention to any friction that might take place.

'Vulnerability'; as we can see from rising sea levels caused by climate change, ecosystems are vulnerable and facing destruction due to increasing populations and urbanization, as well as the strive for development and changing lifestyles. Meanwhile, there are many people whose livelihood is depending on natural resources, so such environmental degradation leads to lower standards of living and higher levels of social vulnerability.

Also, the Asia Pacific Region is often struck by natural disasters, such as typhoons, earthquakes, tsunamis and so on. Due to demographic, socio-economic, and geographic factors, when compared to other regions around the world, the Asia Pacific tends to be more vulnerable to related damages. In fact, the number of disaster victims in the region accounts for ninety percent of disaster victims globally. The strengthening of disaster prevention systems in our region is a pressing issue.

'Internationality'; for instance most of the Pacific countries have a small land area and limited resources. Additionally, in proportion with their demographic and economic scale, domestic markets are small, so economically

many of them have to rely on international trade, mainly import, and international assistance. At the same time, since it consists of many small countries, the sub-region has limited international voice and political influence. Hence, it is necessary that we engage in sustainable development in the Pacific with active cooperation by the international community.

‘Poverty’; in the South Pacific, the average per capita GDP in independent nations is only around 3,000 US dollars. Moreover, inequality is even more serious, with existing disparity especially between those who benefit from international trade and those who do not. The question of poverty is a main issue for this sub-region. Also, we have to note that this problem is tightly interrelated with the above mentioned internationality, environmental vulnerability, and socio-political diversity (Nomura & Abe, 2009).

Due to such characteristics, it is imperative for the Asia Pacific Region to work together with UN agencies, stakeholder governments, multinational corporations, and NGOs, if we aim for the SDGs and strategies adopted by the United Nations. We would like to make human interventions and qualitative results in social work more visible by synchronizing our activities with the information and positive outcomes provided to us by the United Nations and various UN agencies. Also, through collaboration with other sectors, we would like to show how unique outcomes that utilize social work skills can contribute to the solution of social problems. Here and today, I would like to confirm that to achieve this, social workers around the world, especially social work organizations in the Asia Pacific Region, work in unity towards the Sustainable Development Goals and towards the empowerment and wellbeing of those people who live in this region and are in need of support.

The *Global Definition of the Social Work Profession* that we have adopted in 2014 in Melbourne states that our profession brings social change by engaging socio-political systems. How do we make such systems function properly? We have to assess organizations and people involved in these systems, as well as the political situation and search for methods that bring change.

These days, the expression ‘professionals by experience’ has gained great significance. ‘Professionals by experience’; it refers to those closest to us as social workers. In essence, they are service user with whom we have built strong relationships. Ever since the establishment of professional education and practical training, social workers have been working for the best interest of clients; basically we can easily say that this is the purpose of our existence. However, our role today is not limited only to this. Social workers must pay attention to our clients’ culture, experience, and wisdom, focus on their power within fostered throughout their life course and carefully analyze their experience. So that clients will be able to make the best decisions and choices regarding their own lives, social workers must also support them in a way that they can make appropriate choices in their environments.

Social workers recognize that this process itself is in fact that of empowerment and leads to social change. To achieve such practice, in addition to professional experience and skills, we need something more important: values.

In this sense, upon striving for environmental and community sustainability, I must stress that social workers always plan in a client-centered way.

The theme of this year’s World Social Work Day is the ‘Promotion of Community and Environmental Sustainability’. As social workers, we should work in solidarity not only with other social workers worldwide, but with agencies related to the United Nations and other sectors as well. Also, we should visualize our mandates and the outcomes of our collaborative networks and fulfill our function in the realization of the SDGs by setting clear strategies towards concrete goals.

Finally, let us celebrate World Social Work Day together! Happy World Social Work Day to everyone! Thank you very much.

(Original manuscript was written in Japanese and translated by Viktor Virag)