**Eco-wisdom for social workers, leaving no one behind**

**Paper for the IFSW Europe Delegates Meeting October 2022 Berlin**

**Goals for IFSW Europe**

* **recognize climate change as a threat to the well-being of all, and especially to the human rights of people in vulnerable positions**
* **develop ideas to face disasters and problems in order to protect and enhance well-being**
* **support each other in coping with the challenges we face, like the just transition, shortage of energy, water and other basic needs**
* **identify European bodies to address**

Climate change will affect us all, more than anything else. Especially people in vulnerable circumstances will suffer the most from the consequences of global warming, while their carbon footprint is the smallest. Human rights are at stake. The importance of the role of social workers is still underestimated in lots of countries. In this document we try to investigate and develop some thoughts and ideas, as a step to establish an IFSW Europe policy on the subject in order to inspire and learn from each other.

On the Zagreb online conference workshop and during a successful IFSW webinar in May 2022 on the subject we made a start to develop our policies on the matter. Some outcomes are:

1. More information about experiences with community projects like gardening projects, project to make urban areas greener, saving water / energy, etc., is welcome. Horticultural knowledge is needed, alongside gardening skills, technical knowledge and social work. These concepts are spreading over the globe, and there are websites like UNEP.org - Creative Communities for Sustainable Lifestyles where good practices are to be found.
2. Discussion about the neglect of the wisdom and knowledge in indigenous communities (and in communities as such everywhere). And a warning not to take some insights as long as it fits in the dominant ways of thinking. Indigenous knowledge is rooted in the recognition that we as human beings are part of and dependent on our natural surroundings. Participation means also the use of wisdom and skills that are to be found in communities we work with.
3. From an ecological point of view you could say that eco-wisdom requires a paradigm shift in ethics / professional ethics as well as a critique of the central values of self-reliance and the individualistic approach of problems in social policy, based on neo-liberal and anthropocentric thinking.
4. Education is needed in the universities, and for professionals as well. The neo-liberal way of thinking is deeply anchored in most social work institutions in Europe. We should make students and professionals aware of the fact that our wealth is accumulated at the expense of the global south, and the destruction of vast areas on the planet, and that the climate crisis is related to issues of poverty, precarity and health.

A small group within IFSW Europe is thinking about how to bring this further as an IFSW project. This group needs to be extended and supported.

Topics for the delegates meeting:

* As it is a broad subject, we need ideas to focus
* Share positive experiences and research results to inspire
* Formation of a working group / think tank within (but not limited to) IFSW Europe
* Ideas whom / which bodies to address to bring this further
* Recommendations for others, e.g. the Education Commission

**Background information**

**Climate change**

The August 2021 report of the United Nation’s *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* gave a severe warning to all of us. Urgent  action is needed, but even many countries in Europe are struggling with the measures to be taken, and some countries hardly have an agenda on the subject. But all over Europe we see what is happening: more pollution, huge floodings in areas where up till now there were hardly any problems (like some areas in Germany, Belgium and The Netherlands), and lots of countries had big fires in forested and heather areas. We also experience less visible disasters: heat stress in the cities, even people dying in their houses because they cannot cool their houses properly. Health problems in areas with high pollution rates.

We adopt the International Federation of Social Workers’ (IFSW) approach to ‘climate justice’, to the degradation of livable environments and to the waste of resources that affects some of the poorest people in all societies the most. As IFSW’s Climate Justice program states:

*‘ (Globally)…* *people and ecosystems have endured water, land, and air contamination from industrial pollution and toxic agricultural practices, soil erosion, desertification, and species and habitat loss due to extensive deforestation, and an increase in frequency and intensity of disastrous weather patterns, such as typhoons.* *While the climate crisis impacts all of us, those who are marginalized or oppressed are experiencing it to an even greater extent, creating climate injustice for people and our planet. Much of the burden of unsustainable consumption patterns has fallen disproportionately on the most vulnerable people in the world, who typically have the smallest consumption patterns. In addition, these vulnerable people receive fewer of the benefits of the environmental resources. These collective patterns of unsustainable consumption contribute to the climate crisis, making it a global justice issue for people and the planet, this is known as climate injustice.’*

**The Just Transition**

The transition to non-fossil energy will be a big challenge especially for people in social housing areas, and lots of other tenants and house-owners who are financially not in the position to finance big renovations. People with the lowest income have the smallest carbon footprint, but are the most affected. Recently energy prices are rising fast. Measures on climate change seems to be a subject for policy makers and the ones with a higher education and/or well-being. We need to enhance what could be called eco-wisdom in our communities. Shortage of energy supply and high costs are a concern. This will not be an easy task. Sometimes nature preservation projects rivals with job security or the development of new industries. Then move away from traditional environmentally unfriendly industries towards ‘greener’ ones will threaten many workers, often those in low-skilled jobs and leave them facing unemployment. The ‘just transition’ requires that new training and retraining is offered to those in these traditional jobs, so that they are not left behind.

**Why is this important for all social workers**

As we always work with people in vulnerable positions, we already meet the above mentioned issues, or we will in the near future. It will affect us as well as European citizens, be it in different ways depending on our position and the country we live in. It starts with awareness and the need to develop eco-wisdom for all social workers.

There are already quite some initiatives we can learn from. BASW already formulated a statement in August 2021. In The Netherlands social workers helped immediately in the same night the floodings started there, and there are initiatives to support social workers who are involved in the energy transition. In Croatia social workers helped people to save water in times of shortage. This list can surely be complemented with lots of other examples. ‘Green’ social work is becoming more and more part of our working methods, like care farms, common gardens, green mental health, projects to make neighbourhoods (more) green, etc.

What we see is that climate engineering, energy suppliers, even nature preservation bodies chose for the technical approach, and are looking for means to inform and persuade the public, overlooking the important role social workers can play in supporting communities to participate instead of being the subject of (often well meant) policies.

**What is to be done:**

1. **for social workers**

* Develop eco-wisdom knowledge, learning and wisdom among ourselves as citizens and as social workers
* Working for eco-social work, leaving no-one behind
* Help to make necessary changes in the social work education / curriculum of universities

1. **for our work with communities**

* Developing ways of enhancing eco-wisdom among communities that suffer the most
* supporting individuals and communities to cope emotionally and psychologically with consequences of climate change
* Identify communities with disproportionate exposures to climate hazards, in the cities as well as in the countryside; bring to light the wisdom within communities and indigenous peoples, support them to organize themselves
* providing direct, effective support and coordination during environmental disasters.
* Organize training and develop eco-coaching or energy-coaching for ourselves as social workers and for key figures within communities
* Bring research results to a broader public so they can benefit from it and take action.
* Foster innovation in climate adaptation and resilience for disadvantaged communities and vulnerable populations. Help them in adapting the use of new forms of energy, cooking etc., financially, socially and culturally
* Help people to bring more ‘green’ into the cities, like small parks, kitchen gardens etc., to diminish heat stress and
* Encourage spending time outdoors, especially for children, as this enhances well-being.
* Look for ‘green’ and outdoors possibilities in all kinds of our profession, like green mental health etc.

1. **advocacy on national and European level**

* Advocating for and standing in solidarity with people affected by emergencies and long-term environmental risks, protecting and accessing their rights
* Call for action on the causes of climate change by governments, businesses etc.
* Be aware of the closing of polluting industries, mines etc. and what it means for employment rates in the areas
* Address health disparities exacerbated by climate change to enhance community resilience.
* Influence policy makers, city councils, housing corporations and energy suppliers to listen to the public, invite people to participate and act accordingly
* Advocate for the meaningful implementation of the EU’s ‘Just transition’ mechanism

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Rotterdam, September, 2022

<https://www.basw.co.uk/sustainability-environmental-impact-and-climate-justice>

