

1 Concern

Our contemporary world is characterised by global exchanges, connections, dependencies, and interrelations; never before have so many people been on the move, goods transported around the globe, financial systems and industrial production expanded globally. While some people profit from this global exchange and opportunity, the global majority does not have access to the same benefits, rather they and the planet suffer in extreme ways from the negative effects of **globalisation**. Additionally, the unfair paradox is that those who often suffer the most from global failures, mal-development and negative impacts are the ones who usually contribute the least to these societal and ecological ills, and this is known as **environmental injustice**. Global dependencies are a reality that are demonstrated by the recent global pandemic COVID-19, that has affected the entire world, though with evident injustices and disparities in the impact. Such global challenges underline the **need for global change** towards healthy, strong, and just systems that protect people and the environment in a sustainable manner.

While there are certain benefits to advances in agriculture, scientific knowledge, and technological innovations, they have not been able to eliminate poverty, hunger, preventable health problems, and many other societal challenges, yet they have even exacerbated many of these social and environmental injustices. This, in combination with financial mismanagement, has led to devastating **inequality** among people, communities and countries, resulting in 1.3 billion people in 104 countries still living in multidimensional **poverty**¹. With concern we observe the power of some governments and (often transnational) business companies who **violate human rights**, dilute social protection mechanisms, and destroy the environment in pursuit of their own political and economic gains. In order to counter this, social workers are advancing the conversation in ways that may eradicate the dominance of the economic growth-centred thinking (often termed neo-liberal policies) and create pathways for true sustainability and justice for both people and planet.²

Climate change represents a further, essential global subject. Climate change has now become a climate crisis and is close to a tipping point where unprecedented natural catastrophes must be expected. The climate crisis is directly connected to human activities and the increase in the world population, and is not merely a consequence of natural climatic change. It is clear that the planet has undergone water, land, and air contamination from travel, industrial pollution, toxic agricultural practices, soil erosion, desertification and destruction of the natural environment generally.

To address these diverse global challenges, the United Nations' **Sustainable Development Goals** (UN SDGs) have become a promising global instrument and 'language' among governments, multilateral organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the business sector. However, various definitions³, justifications and approaches for the UN SDGs have arisen and, with them, misinterpretations and contradictions, unfortunately leading to divisiveness and complications in achieving the goals.

¹ United Nations Development Program and Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (2019).

² Powers, Meredith et al (2020).

³ ICC (2017).

Social workers around the globe offer crucial professional insights that are urgently needed in these conversations and actions. Consequently it is essential that social workers take on the responsibility of active partnership in addressing the UN SDGs and advancing the discussions within and beyond these. Social workers should similarly participate in and contribute to the exchanges, and become developers, partners and implementers of the intended change process.

Therefore, this paper aims to

a) affirm the support of the UN SDGs by the IFSW, and

b) articulate the contribution of the social work profession to the UN SDGs.

It will also provide guidelines for its members to amplify communities' and people's voices by actively utilising and adding value to the UN SDGs' objectives.

2 Why Social Work supports the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

IFSW affirms and supports the UN's Social Development Goals, recognizing their momentum and the opportunities they create to assist and promote social, economic and ecological change globally. The combination and collaboration among these are crucial to foster welfare, equality and inclusion in all their forms and dimensions.

2.1 The content of the SDGs

The UN SDGs were agreed upon in 2015, by all 193 UN member countries at the time. One of the main objectives of the UN SDGs is to transform the world into a place where there is no poverty, and where there is no one left behind^{4,5}.

The total of 17 goals can be grouped into three pillars: the **social, economic and environmental** pillars. Each of the goals is interlinked and interconnected with other UN SDGs, mirroring the complexity of the connections between local situations in a globalized world. While all goals and indicators are of equal rank and interrelated, their priorities for action varies by country and between geographic regions. The first 16 goals focus on concrete areas such as ending hunger, achieving gender equality, education, peace and taking action to protect the climate and environment. The UN SDG 17 on the other hand is a crosscutting theme that was adopted to shape all other areas: it is called '**partnership for the goals**'. Partnership is also among the guiding principles of the UN SDGs, called the 5 P's (People, Peace, Prosperity, Planet, Partnership). Goal 17 seeks to strengthen global partnerships to support and achieve the ambitious targets of the 2030 UN SDG Agenda, bringing together national governments, the international community, civil society, the private sector and other actors. It demonstrates the need to work together, to move away from 'silo' thinking and to address the global challenges in an holistic and sustainable manner to achieve a real transformation. For this all sectors need to work together – not in a hierarchy, but in a genuine partnership.

2.2 First reviews of the SDGs

The SDG goals are ambitious. The Global Civic Society spotlight report of 2019 demonstrated that despite the great hopes for the UN SDGs' transformational power, five years after the adoption most countries are

⁴ United Nations (2019). Sustainable Development. Knowledge Platform.

⁵ UNDP (2018). What does it mean to leave no one behind?

off-track with the achievement of their set goals. Governments struggle with their attempts towards the UN SDGs transformational vision⁶.

Similar negative results have been reported by the UN's own research group in 2019. After having recognized that insufficient action has been taken and many countries are not working towards achieving the UN SDGs, the UN changed its language and called for action on EVERY level: more people need to become active and measures need to be coordinated. The Expert Group Meeting on UN SDGs summarized the lessons learned from the first four years of the UN Agenda 2030, that the:

*"[...] whole-of-society approach is important here, not just to reach those populations, but to empower them and give them access not just to basic services, but also to give them opportunities. Besides that, there is still a high need for awareness raising, among not only societies but also governments."*⁷

In his call to action, the Secretary-General of the UN calls on everyone across professions, societal levels, regions and nations, to work towards the creation of innovative solutions and strong policies to fulfil the goals⁸.

IFSW knows that the social work profession can and shall be a strong and recognised partner. However, structural change is necessary on themes of all the 17 Goals that are mentioned. Housing, ecology and social protection are only a few themes mentioned, but there are many more.

3 How Social Workers Contribute to the UN SDGs

3.1 Social Work Definition of SDGs

To ensure an effective use of the instrument the UN SDGs provide to social work and vice versa, it is important to clarify social work's very own definition and understanding of the terms **sustainability, development and goals**:

Sustainability. Social workers understand sustainability as patterns and policies that establish long-term and more permanent solutions for the wellbeing of the entire ecosystem, including humans, for current and future generations. It requires a shift to an ecosocial worldview that takes into account the wellbeing of the whole ecosystem. Addressing the patterns and policies that undermine sustainability necessitates addressing injustice in all its forms.

Sustainability includes ways we can reduce aspects of our 'ecological footprint' or consumption patterns to decrease the harm and injustices from occurring in the first place. An ecological footprint is an estimate of the burden we place on our world as we consume energy, food, land, and water. However, sustainability is not only about outcomes that remain for a lasting period, but also implies a holistic, eco-transformation in the way we see the world and operate.⁹

⁶ Global Civil Society Report on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs (2019). Spotlight report 2019.

⁷ United Nations (2019). The future is now.

⁸ United Nations (2020). Ten years to transform our world.

⁹ See the website of IFSW. Also see the IFSW edited workbook series *Social Work Promoting Community and Environmental Sustainability* and the IFSW Climate Justice Program. *The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development* (2010-2020) mandates that we promote sustainable communities and environments.

Development. For social workers ‘development’ is not understood in an economic sense, nor should it define an ‘underdeveloped’ group or society that ought to normatively reach the level of any other ‘developed’ group or society. Development is a dynamic process leading to the wellbeing of both people and planet, which involves built in participation with people who are affected by its impact. Taking into account historical, cultural, and environmental underpinnings of societies, such specific understanding of development involves the strengthening of self-esteem, capabilities and responsibilities. In addition, development requires knowledge about the decision-making process regarding development efforts at an individual and community level, leading to participation in the transformation of societal structures where diversity and human rights are not only accepted but enforced, promoted and enjoyed. Hence, development involves the deliberate empowerment and strengthening of people’s capabilities to reach a sense of freedom and wellbeing. That includes communities, society and the natural environment.¹⁰

Goals. The UN SDGs Agenda has integrated the voice of civil society organizations and aims to be realized locally, nationally and globally. The IFSW’s Social Work Global Agenda, the Global Definition of Social Work, the Statement of Ethics and the Policy Papers all express our understanding of the needs and purpose of social work action. Our social work approach creates goals from the bottom-up (community and people-driven) including the knowledge and needs from people who are affected by the goals (leave no one behind), driven by principles of social justice, human rights and holistic and sustainable development.

3.2 Partnership – a basic principle in social work

As mentioned above, partnerships are not only one of the 17 goals of the UN SDGs, they are essential for the whole of the UN Agenda 2030.

Working with the mandate to intervene at the point where people interact with their environments, social workers do integrate “[...] *the various social systems that people are embedded in and the natural, geographic environment, which has a profound influence on the lives of people*”¹¹. Sustainable and effective solutions require a holistic approach that involves people and actions on a multisectoral level, from the point of community action, to governments and to a global level. For social workers, to *partner* does involve exchanging knowledge and insights and collaboratively and coherently creating and finding solutions for realizing the changes needed in creating true sustainability in society.

Themes such as empowerment, partnerships and environment are core elements of IFSW and the UN SDGs. In its policy paper on *Globalization and the Environment*, IFSW

*“[...] calls on social workers and their representative bodies to recognise the importance of the natural and built environment to the social environment, to develop environmental responsibility and care for the environment in social work practice and management today and for future generations, to work with other professionals to increase our knowledge and with community groups to develop advocacy skills and strategies to work towards a healthier environment and to ensure that environmental issues gain increased presence in social work education.”*¹²

¹⁰ IFSW (2014). Definition of Social Work.

¹¹ IFSW (2014). Definition of Social Work.

¹² IFSW (2012). Policy Paper on Globalization and the Environment.

3.3 Bottom-up and top down

Social workers understand that the combination of their bottom-up approach along with the UN SDGs more top-down-approach creates the potential to bridge the gaps between governmental theory (i.e. policy papers, global agendas) and practice (i.e. daily work with people and civil societies, operational implementation). Integrating the knowledges of people and respecting the environment does create the needed sustainable change and can prevent harmful implementation of policies, and lead to social and climate justice. The willingness of governments to widen multi-professional transdisciplinary partnerships and networks, as outlined in the UN SDGs, create responsibilities for further collaboration – for instance between states and national social work associations.

Social and climate justice, equality and partnership is what social workers seek and what requires both, top-down and bottom-up change. All of these themes are related to global policies and agendas and have financial implications. Therefore, the current inequitable global capitalism has to be transformed to a new sustainable global financial system, that bans exploitation of both people and planet, that is based on solidarity, fairness, and the betterment of the whole society and environment. Social workers will continue to promote social change and social development, standing against exploitation of people and nature and against unjust structures that allow for wealth concentration in the hands of the few.

To sum up, IFSW is aligned with the UN SDGs because of their value for a global transformation to a just and fair world with the vision of ‘leaving no one behind’. The vast potential and global accord of the UN SDGs outweighs much of their shortcomings, making them an unprecedented agreed instrument for action on every level.

4 IFSW Policy Statement on Incorporating the UN SDGs in Social Work Programmes

The momentum towards a successful and sustainable impact targeted at the defined common global goals of ‘transforming the world’ and ‘leaving no one behind’ seems ideal. Social Workers consider global and national agendas with sensitivity towards the people and communities they work with and their environments. In this sense, the social work profession is a key partner for the UN SDGs and its ambitions.

With a social work lens, we advocate for people’s needs (bottom-up approach), provide data that underlines the messages in the discussion at a policy level and strive to influence decisions, infrastructure, systems and services. Social workers advocate for transformation to a just, fair and solidary world.

Social workers facilitate and foster partnership within communities and between various stakeholders and on local, national and international levels to translate UN SDGs in various ways (social, economic and ecological) and designing together a new knowledge on sustainable solutions for the implementation action.

The Social Workers whole-community-driven perspective provides a unique role for social workers to disclose the verified insights and real-life experiences of the people they work with to various stakeholders, as well as to reinforce the profession’s human rights principles.

5 Implications of this Policy Paper

“Despite social work’s robust network and its appreciated reputation on a community level, social workers often face challenges when advocating for their objectives in policy making, implementation and evaluation. Social work requires enhanced recognition of the positive impacts it brings and the social sustainability it can achieve through its particular methodologies.” Rory Truell, IFSW General Secretary, May 2020.

5.1 IFSW invites **global, national and local governments** to build strong partnerships and to commonly endorse the realization of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Governments are asked to recruit and partner with active stakeholders of various levels and disciplines.

5.2 National **social work associations** shall advocate for social services and promote a strong and skilled social work profession – and make this visible to partners and stakeholders. Gaps and opportunities concerning the implementation of the UN SDGs that social workers see locally must be addressed. Last but not least, the government’s accountability and obligation to the objectives of the UN SDGs shall be recognized in a balanced manner in every policy development, political decision and budget planning.

5.3 IFSW urges every actor, whether government, NGO, CSO or business partner, to do their best possible to **balance out** the highly uneven distribution of resources and capabilities and commit themselves to transform the world.

5.4 **Social work educators** are requested to integrate, in a similar way to the Social Protection Systems, the UN SDGs into their curriculum:

“IFSW stresses the importance of training of social workers and calls upon schools of social work to include sustainable social development in the curriculum and prepare students in theory and practice to work with social protection systems.” IFSW Policy Paper on Social Protection, 2016.

5.5 **Social workers** are actors of change – the UN SDGs offer a unique network to liaise with other professions, partners, and stakeholders to establish and deepen a holistic and interdisciplinary multi sectoral achievement/approach.

5.6 The need for climate justice is affecting the people we work with who – even before the climate crisis – were already in vulnerable situations. Therefore, a commitment needs to be given towards sustainable and eco-friendly solutions.

5.7 **IFSW** shall support its global network and build a strong knowledge base by providing a **platform for best practice exchange** and global learning opportunities, including the IFSW Climate Justice Program.

5.8 IFSW **supports** its members to contribute to a critical analysis of power relations and to actively contribute to future agenda and policies.

IFSW Policy Paper: Social Work and the UN Sustainable Development Goals

June 2020 | led by Priska Fleischlin, IFSW UN Commissioner with contribution of many social work colleagues within and around the IFSW UN Commission

6 Sources

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7 Review

According to the IFSW policy paper on policy statements, reviews of such papers shall take place no later than six years after their adoption. For the policy paper at hand, the review will be due in the year 2026.