

Speech Notes for World Social Work Day at the United Nations, Geneva

Rory Truell, IFSW Secretary-General

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Dear colleagues, social workers, representatives of UN agencies, member states, students and people concerned with their own and other's social development. I want to acknowledge that we are partners in this event with a common vision: The engagement with communities in a joint journey to fulfil the sustainable development goals, to make a reality of all people's fundamental rights and for local, national and global social justice. Our presence here today confirms our commitment to working together in meeting these objectives. And we are not alone.

Throughout the world, there are gatherings just like this that have been taking place around World Social Work Day. Some are in the rural villages of Kenya as the people have finished their day's work in the fields or in the marketplace. They sit under the evening sun and talk with social workers to make plans for their own development and how to link this with all the other citizens in the world. They join the African webinars and bring their voice, experience and their support to a global agenda for change. Other meetings are taking place from the communities struggling in India to the protestors in Myanmar, they too are actively joining online Asia-Pacific forums. The indigenous voices of Peru are now speaking with social workers, policy makers and other community leaders in Latin America. Refugees seeking new lives in Europe are gathering with large European meetings facilitated by social workers; and social workers that are deeply involved with Black Lives Matter and climate justice are holding forums across their region.

Things are changing and people are ready to act for shared futures.

Earlier this month, 21 international NGOs representing the entire health and social work workforces - doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, specialists and social workers - formed a coalition of action to advocate for the equitable distribution of vaccines across the world. The coalition embraced that health is not just a medical issue but also equally a social issue; but at this point in history as we see the failures of governments in working together, it is above all a political issue.

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The vast world of social work, which reaches into nearly every community, gathered together last year in a conference of over 20'000 social workers, policy makers, heads of governments (that

share the vision) and community leaders, to set a ten-year strategy for social transformation. The theme of this year's World Social Work Day: Ubuntu was one of the outcomes of that mass gathering. It is the first time in this global agenda we have used an indigenous word and philosophy as a guiding constellation to take us forward.

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Ubuntu, our African colleagues teach is that humanity is beyond the values of individuality. It is the underpinning philosophy that United Nations needed when a past Secretary-General coined the phrase: Leave no one behind. Ubuntu, our colleagues explain is the most prime and most central form of social protection. It imparts to us that we see our neighbour's child as our own, and their success is our success too. Ubuntu, the people who practice it tell us, is more than providing love and care, it also, they say, is a concept for structural change. A mechanism to bind people together to make change in their social, political and environmental world.

So what changes need to happen in the world, how can we achieve them and what are the potential roles of the United Nations and social work?

One of the lessons we have all learnt in the last 12 months of this pandemic is that people and systems can change. We have witnessed cultural changes in how complex organisations can breakdown their silos and work together. Organisational leaders are picking up the phone, like never before and reaching out to one another for cooperation. Antonio Guterres asked his deputy Secretary-General to reach out to IFSW as the UN increasing recognises the fundamental importance of social work to the SDGs. Throughout the world, police, health workers, educators and community leaders and business leaders are talking together, cooperating and taking joint action.

But there is one failing, a global cultural failing of the international political system to act in global solidarity. We can understand why, to a certain extent. We can understand the pressure on government leaders to prioritise the people they represent. It is the structure of geo-political reality of this time. So how can we change it?

Human rights are rarely given. Rights are demanded before they are recognised. Civil rights movements, feminist movements, indigenous movements have taught us this.

Now is the time for change and to act for shared futures.

We must bring back the SDGs and bring to the SDGs the voices of communities. How they interpret their developmental aspirations and how they identify their role in achieving them. As social workers we are well aware of the power and potential that sits with people. When vulnerability is transformed to strength anything can happen.

The realisation of this strength and global civil society unity for new and shared futures is the answer. Governments, in the end will have to follow and the global agendas for justice, equality, sustainability and economic security for all can flourish.

If you agree – do you agree?

If you agree, each of us in this meeting has a role to play.

I am aware we are participating in a United Nations forum. Is it time for you to consider, our partners in the UN: to extend your engagement with civil society beyond that of projects? Would a UN sponsored gathering of community leaders, leaders from the mass movements of climate justice, woman's rights, Black Lives Matter, indigenous rights, along with others struggling globally and nationally for change and justice - Would such a gathering contribute to a new political environment and culture?

As, possibly the world's largest NGO, IFSW asks you today for your engagement and discussion on this concept.

To the social workers in this forum, we are already in role. We have reach into nearly every community in the world. But are we consistently, like our colleagues in Kenya, sitting in the community gatherings and supporting their active global voice? Are we consistently linking peoples that want change - together, and supporting them to become the actors of change,

not only in their own lives, but to raise their horizons to contributing to change across the world?

These tasks do not require us to work harder, all of us already work hard, but these tasks require us to keep working differently as we have been over the last 12 months.

People are ready to act for shared futures – and we must act with them.

We have walked to far, to now turn back. Let us commit to continuing this journey, supporting one another and co-building with others, who are ready to go, the global civil society voice and action that the world so desperately needs.

Thank you so much.