

# The Role of Social Workers in Advancing a New Eco-Social World

## 1. Concern

The world is facing unparalleled levels of social and environmental crises; climate change, pandemics, persistent inequality, lack of consensus internationally at the geo-political level, and increased conflict. These crises are intertwined and have profound effects on people and their communities through the dramatic increase in the economic, social, emotional, and ecological challenges.

The environment has been threatened through the exploitation and degradation of the planet, peoples, and cultures that were foundational to colonialism<sup>i</sup>, compounded by neoliberal economic policies embedded in state practices and the conditionalities attached to loans of international financial institutions. These policies have contributed to environmental degradation, increased social and economic inequality, reduced rights for workers, minimal formal social protection systems, increased migration, human trafficking, and the violation of human rights. We are in dire need of a transformation of the political and economic systems from extractive and exploitative to inclusive and sustainable policies and practices at global and local levels that can halt environmental destruction and create wellbeing for all people.

The last five years having been the hottest on record posing an existential threat to the planet, humanity, and human rights. Environmental degradation puts us at additional risk of pandemics such as Covid-19<sup>ii</sup>. Covid-19 has created great distress across the globe, but for the most marginalized it has laid bare entrenched inequalities at social, health and economic levels. Reductions in social protections, healthcare, and education have a gendered impact in that women and girls carry the care burden that is no longer shared with the state; this has been magnified globally through the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>iii</sup>. There is increased vulnerability to poverty and hunger due to livelihood strategies interrupted by COVID-19, conflict, and climate change<sup>iv</sup>. Further, global inequality is reflected in access to vaccines; of more than 10 billion doses given out globally, only 1% have been administered in low-income countries<sup>v</sup>. Delayed access to vaccines prevents governments from reopening their economies, compounded by inequitable debt service costs that prevent countries from investing in recovery and tackling the worsening impact of the climate crisis which they did not create.

Climate change increases food insecurity as the global food production system contributes to climate change, accounting for more than a third of greenhouse gas emissions<sup>vi</sup>, with limited access to healthy food seen in diet-related health issues, including stunting and wasting.<sup>vii</sup> The uneven and unfair recovery<sup>viii</sup> is eroding global solidarity. Climate change is a 'crisis multiplier' that can lead to, or exacerbate, conflict as it affects food security, natural resources, and migration patterns<sup>ix</sup>. Conflict also results in complex humanitarian emergencies, internally displaced people, refugees, poverty, hunger, and famine.

These interconnected crises serve as a call for transformative action towards a new world with new eco-social contracts. This vision to restore balance in our world is driven by collaboration, sustainability, leaving no one behind, based on the dignity and respect of every person and the planet. The recognition of the interconnectedness of all life in our ecosystem is integral in the guiding ethics of social workers. Only through co-building a new eco-social world can we ensure a sustainable and fairer world for all of us and future generations.

This paper affirms to:

- a) Expand on the 1996 IFSW Human Rights Policy and the 2014 Globalization and the Environment Policy
- b) Articulates and supports the development of the IFSW's position on co-building a new eco-social world grounded in a holistic human rights framework
- c) Call to action for governments and key stakeholders to assure a more sustainable and just world.

## **2. Context**

As the global mass movement to address the urgent need to co-design and co-build a new eco-social world grows, so does the engagement of social workers globally. The profession has a long history of social action and advocacy, with the context of community and systems engagement reflective of the diversity of our profession together in our communities. The growing crisis of climate change, pandemics, environmental destruction, conflict and global inequality (including lack of social protection systems) diminish human and environmental rights that find social workers with a critical role in this global movement to address these inequities.

Through building relationships and partnerships between civil society, global bodies, governments, and United Nations agencies<sup>x</sup>, we contribute to and help co-build a new eco-social world movement.

## **3. Promoting a Holistic Rights Framework**

It is time to extend the existing UN Human Rights Declaration to a Holistic Rights Framework to encompass social human rights, cultural rights, ecosystem rights, and the broader rights of nature to ensure that the global crises of climate change, pandemics, and conflict are addressed and that a new eco-social world can flourish. This recognizes that in 2021 United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council Resolution of the Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment<sup>xi</sup> and the appointment of a Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change honor the nexus of human rights and the environment.

Human rights and environmental issues are inextricably connected. Climate change is eroding the rights to health, life, culture, housing, food, water and sanitation, self-determination, development, peace and security, a standard of living adequate for health and well-being, and cultural rights.

In the 1996 IFSW Human Rights Policy states;

Human Rights condenses into two words the struggle for dignity and fundamental freedoms which allow the full development of human potential. Civil and political rights have to be accompanied by economic, social and cultural rights.

A Holistic Rights Framework recognizes individual human rights, (dignity and fundamental freedoms), social human rights, (civil, economic, and political), cultural rights, ecosystem rights, and the broader rights of nature. Within this framework are driving values and principles: Recognizing the importance of diversity, sustainability, self-determination, and that all people are responsible to protect and advance the rights of others as well as nature. The aim of the framework is to establish a consensus that balances all rights through participatory engagement in inclusive policies and practices for our shared futures.

### **The Role of Social Workers**

Social workers have an important role working with these complex yet interconnected issues on local, national, and global levels. Social workers utilize holistic and ecological approaches that are driven by knowledge and professional ethics and values with a commitment to engaging and supporting diverse communities through practice that honors the importance of reciprocal relationships with communities to advance human rights, economic, environmental, and social justice.

The social work profession engages across micro-mezzo-and macro levels of policy and practice to co-build partnerships that create change and promote opportunities that support and build sustainable development and eco-social practice, committed to building a new eco-social world in which all rights are ensured and no one is left behind. Social workers are working within communities and governments, co-designing and co-building social and environmental protection, leading to capacity-building, and policy-development to combat complex and intersecting crises.

### **4. IFSW Policy Statement on Co-building a New Eco-Social World**

The world needs new policies, social contracts, and practices that foster relationships and partnerships that build security and confidence for all people and the sustainability of the planet. The social work profession is an important stakeholder and partner for global action (including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) <sup>xii</sup> and other local, regional and global development strategies.

An eco-social approach requires key actions in relation to the 5 (equally considered) dimensions of sustainability: **people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership** <sup>xiii</sup> as outlined by the United Nations. These are expanded by IFSW where indicated:

**People:** In line with the central premise of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, "leaving no one behind" must be at the core of all governments decisions that ensure human rights for all. IFSW recognizes that in order for rights to be realized, it takes all of us to ensure dignity and respect.

**Planet:** An eco-social approach recognizes that humans are part of the ecosystem, and that human and environmental wellbeing are interrelated. Climate action must prioritize listening to and working with First Nations peoples all over the world. IFSW and partners to the Global Definition of Social Work, recognize the equal foundation knowledge from indigenous wisdom as central to achieving an eco-social world.

**Prosperity** An eco-social understanding of prosperity must critically examine societal and economic structures, practices, and ways of life. The IFSW promotes transforming

global economies towards a more sustainable, inclusive and fair approach, driven by a change in understanding of prosperity from purely economic growth towards sustainable social and environmental wellbeing.

**Peace:** An eco-social approach requires new bottom-up approaches that recognize that national and individual interests are secondary to global fairness, peace and sustainability. IFSW views an eco-social world that respects cultural diversity and identity in the context of global citizenship and reciprocal respect, creating a foundation for sustainable peace.

**Partnership:** The SDGs call for “a spirit of strengthened global solidarity”. For social workers, partnership starts with respecting difference and diversity, centered in equity, and by listening and understanding each other. IFSW promotes the sharing of knowledge and insights, of working in collaboration, that is centered in equity that leads to agreed solutions and joint actions for sustainable shared futures.

## 5. Impact of this Policy Paper

IFSW will work towards:

- The co-design and co-building of urgent global action to implement the 5 dimensions of sustainability: **people, planet, prosperity, peace** and **partnership**.
- Engaging governments and other key stakeholders to recognize social workers as key partners in this global action, with the role of engaging and working with communities as agents of change.
- Integrating the principles of a new eco-social world into social work education.
- Transforming social protection systems from reactive to preventative systems to support communities prior to natural disasters, environmental degradation, and pandemics so they are better equipped to withstand these events.
- Address current and historical injustices that impact people as barriers to their involvement in co-designing and co-building our shared futures,
- Building partnerships and allyship to work with local communities to collaboratively identify the necessary steps for a just and sustainable world.
- Visionary leadership by national associations that create policy and direct practice eco-social initiatives rooted in the holistic human rights framework.
- Eradicating poverty *through creating* sustainable economies and environmental and social systems that leave no one behind.

## 6. 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 2028. It is also recognized that the New Eco-Social world movement is expanding rapidly and therefore this policy should be updated in accordance with this movement.

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