



## REPORT TO INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS GENERAL MEETING - April 2024



### INTRODUCTION

The Commonwealth Organisation for Social Work (COSW) is a partner organisation of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (Constitution, Article 8) and has worked closely with IFSW for over 20 years. This is the first written report. A memorandum of understanding between IFSW and the partner organisation is being developed and enables each organisation to recognise their respective roles. COSW recognises IFSW as the peak global representative of social workers and is formally committed in its constitution to uphold the IFSW/IASSW ethical principles.

Information about COSW, its activities and governance, can be found at [www.cosw.info](http://www.cosw.info).

### THE COMMONWEALTH OF NATIONS

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 56 independent and equal countries in Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe and the Pacific. It is home to one-third of the world's population and includes both advanced economies and developing countries. Most of the member states were formally connected through the British empire and share similar administrative and governance arrangements, but some recently joined members do not share that history. The Commonwealth is frequently described as a family including not only governments but also civil society groups and friendship networks. The political head of the Commonwealth is the Head of Government in the country which last hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), currently Rwanda. The next CHOGM is in Samoa. The ceremonial Head of the Commonwealth is currently King George III. This is not a hereditary position but one chosen by member states.

A network of civil, cultural, intergovernmental and professional organisations participates in Commonwealth activities; there are over 80 accredited organisations including COSW, including doctors, nurses, architects, city planners and teachers as well as trades unions and representatives of specific groups such as people with disabilities. Accredited organisations have rights to attend Ministerial meetings, take part in policy consultations and attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting including personal meetings with Heads.

The Charter of the Commonwealth gives expression to its defining values – peace and justice; tolerance, respect and solidarity; care for our environment, and for the most vulnerable.

### COSW HISTORY

COSW was formed following an initial meeting at the IFSW world conference in Sri Lanka in 1994 following an initiative by Malaysian social worker, Anthony Tan. There was unanimous agreement to explore the formation of a formal body. A constitution was signed at the world conference in 2000 and COSW was registered in London as a company limited by guarantee in 2005. Many IFSW Executive Board members and activists from Commonwealth countries have contributed to the development of COSW.

COSW is an organisation 'FOR' social work, unlike IFSW which is an organisation of social workers. COSW governance requires that members of the new Commonwealth Council are



qualified social workers, but non-social workers can be associate members. The COSW Board has always included representatives of all Commonwealth regions, many of whom have also held IFSW roles.

### **COSW GOVERNANCE**

COSW is implementing a new and innovative governance structure, which includes a formal role for IFSW member organisations in Commonwealth member states. COSW is not a federation of national organisations, so has a different structure to IFSW. However, a new Commonwealth Council is being created with one representative from each Commonwealth country. The IFSW member organisations can choose to play a key role in selecting the national representative. The Commonwealth Council members are the formal voting members of COSW and appoint the Board. Any other person or organisation who supports the COSW objectives in support of social work can become associate members and can participate in an annual online Policy Forum. COSW promotes a [Statement](#) on Human Rights for all people in the Commonwealth, which recognises the legacy of colonialism, racism and other discriminations which have left an indelible legacy within the Commonwealth.

The Honorary Officers are Sylvia Daisy Romanus (India, President), the Sharon Rose-Gittens (Barbados, Treasurer), Naomi Spencer (Australia, Board Secretary) and David N Jones (UK, Main Representative to the Commonwealth Institutions).

### **ACTIVITIES**

COSW has operated since its foundation on a voluntary basis with very limited income and no paid staff. Support has been given by some national associations and there have been some small grants from the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Recent activities can be found on the COSW website and in the Newsletters. COSW is very grateful to IFSW for promoting Newsletters and COSW statements on the IFSW website and social media. COSW likewise promotes IFSW activities.

The flagship programme for COSW is the Commonwealth Young Carer Charter. The idea for a focus on young carers came from a Ugandan social worker on a Commonwealth Professional Fellowship in the UK. The development of the charter involved young carers in more than 10 Commonwealth countries. The Kenyan National Association of Social Workers has played a key role in hosting a series of young carer festivals since 2006. The Young Carer Charter has been recognised in Ministerial Communiqués and is championed by Oritsé Williams, a musician and founder member of the JLS Band, who is the Commonwealth Young Carer Champion and a partner with COSW. COSW has received funding to create a video showcasing the voices of Commonwealth young carers. Information about the young carer project is available at <https://cosw.info/young-cares/>.

Other activities include playing a key role in the Independent Forum of Commonwealth Organisations (which helps to coordinate development of shared policy positions), attendance at the biannual CHOGM, membership of the Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Health representing civil society in this meeting of government officials, playing an active role in the Commonwealth Health Professions and Partners Alliance, participation in the Youth Ministers' Meeting, contributing to Commonwealth Year of Youth 2023-4, holding webinars on regulation of



social workers in Commonwealth countries, helping to set up the Commonwealth Children's Interest Group (ComCIG) of accredited organisations, promoting the Kigali Declaration on Child Care and Protection Reform, promoting the IFSW survey of the working conditions of social workers, developing a study of the history of social work across the Commonwealth in partnership with the London University Institute of Commonwealth Studies (ICwS) and making statements on topical issues including violence against women. The [annual report](#) is on the website.

### **THANKS TO IFSW**

IFSW and COSW share the same ideals and objectives. COSW welcomes the partnership and close working relationship with IFSW and looks forward to continuing to work together to support the development and recognition of social work and social workers worldwide.

Sylvia Daisy Romanus (President)

David N Jones (Main Representative to Commonwealth Institutions)

17 March 2024