

IFSW Global President and Secretary-General's Report to the 2024 General Meeting

Dear colleagues and friends,

This is the first time we have been able to hold this event face-to-face since 2018 and we are delighted that not only will it be a physical meeting, but also a hybrid event with intimate online participation. This highlights how the Federation has grown from the pandemic, combining the desire for face-to-face experiences while positively responding to the reality that not all our members can obtain visas or afford to travel. The result is that the Federation is now more able to live up to its own values of inclusiveness than before the pandemic. So, dear members, welcome to the 2024 General Meeting and welcome to the historic first-ever hybrid General Meeting.

This meeting also marks the halfway mark of the President's first term, and we want to thank all who supported this part of our Federation's continuous journey of development. We know that for some it may have taken some thinking when a candidate challenged the mould of more than 90 years by standing for Global President proudly as an Ubuntu Practitioner and an Indigenous social worker. This action was intended to both affirm the traditions from Africa and indigeneity and also to respect and uphold all the other inclusive traditions that have been important in this profession's development. We of course welcome any comments on other traditions that need to be acknowledged as our Federation expands both in numbers and in cultures. But at this moment of reflection, before this General Meeting, we wish to acknowledge the large strides the Federation has undertaken and the courage it has taken you, the members, to walk this path.

We note that the last President, Silvana Martinez was the first ever global president from Latin America and in this term, we have the first ever global president from the region of Africa. We note that in 2021, the profession embraced our first Indigenous theme 'Ubuntu' and this month commences our second year-long theme by highlighting 'Buen Vivir'. It has been like listening to music when hearing colleagues from around the world reflecting upon this theme and making connections to their own traditions and finding ways to utilize their own cultures in the process of transformational change. It has also been a joy observing the few initial objectors who at the beginning articulated "that we must use English words and mainstream themes" finding themselves becoming the biggest advocates for Ubuntu and Buen Vivir as they became more confident in understanding how these ancient traditions can enhance and deepen practice today.

We have continued developing new and exciting partnerships following the Global People's Summit *Co-Building A New Eco-Social World* in 2022. This has featured in many of our activities in each region as we develop new ways of working with the impact of global behaviour on local lives.

But it would be wrong for us to say that the last two-year period has all been a joy and easy. It has not always been so. We believe all past Global Presidents and Secretaries-General will understand that there are many complexities that often arise unexpectedly in any given week. Because of this, we have drawn on the past presidents' advice and assistance. So, we say a special thank you in particular to David, Gary, Ruth and Silvana. Naturally, we have also had the benefit and privilege of working closely with the wonderful people in the global executive who give significant amounts of their time and wisdom to their own associations, their regions and the complex world of working globally. Alongside this, the Secretariat staff and Commissions have tirelessly given operational expression to the pathways set out in our constitution and the mandates from the General Meetings.

We hope your reading of this overview will illustrate the wide range of complex activities that are going on. But of course, you will find more detail in the regional and commission reports that have been submitted alongside this report to the General Meeting. Sometimes you may notice that there seem to be slight slips backwards, as in this report we have felt it important to acknowledge these occurrences, but these are always in the context of big leaps forwards. Overall, we think the Federation can stand proudly in playing its part in advancing the role of social work towards a new eco-social world.

New Members

Since we last met online in 2022, we have increased our membership by accepting the Afghanistan Social Workers Organisation (ASO) into our ranks. This followed a visit by the IFSW Secretary-General Rory Truell, the then Global Vice President Ana Radulescu, and Hamed Olamaee from the Iranian Association. Challenges were of course present, as worldwide governments had formed a blockade of sanctions against the ruling Taliban regime. Despite this, IFSW took the position of recognising social work in the country and its role in supporting the people and their right to development. Along with the benefits and experience that ASO brought to our Federation, our act of recognising people and their right to development as a 'fundamental human right', separate from the ruling authorities, also won IFSW considerable respect across the international NGO and development communities and boosted our reputation and credibility within the United Nations.

Three other associations joined in December 2022 Guinea Bissau, Kazakhstan and Ukraine.

You will see in the agenda for this meeting that we will also be considering another contentious application for membership as we will discuss and vote on Taiwan's application as an independent member, and we look forward to hearing your views and considerations on how we collectively apply the profession's principles in this context. In addition, we will consider an application from the Cambodian Association of Social workers.

Each of these applications show a continuing demonstration of a growing and strong profession. An inclusive profession that is on target to have a member organisation

in each and every country in the near future, setting a model example of international cooperation and action.

Showing Solidarity and Taking Action in Times of War and Disaster

The past two years have been plagued by many wars and disasters throughout the world. Africa is no stranger to war and disasters, for example, over the last two years 1.8 million people died from conflict and displacement in Ethiopia alone. Further wars and conflicts rage in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, The Central African Republic, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan, the list goes on.

Many people outside of Africa will not know of the wars, disasters and raging conflicts that are part of the legacy of colonialisation, as they are often not reported in the mainstream Western press. Nor are the highly dangerous situations in Latin America and Asia-Pacific where many of our members are working.

This global media trend of highlighting wars in Ukraine or the Middle East suggests that some lives are worth more than others. The paler the skin the more the worth and newsworthy. From our global positions, we also see some of this dynamic being played out within our own profession. We witness individuals applying their most concentrated advocacy skills for one or the other side in a war in which they are not directly involved taking place north of Africa, but the same individuals remain completely silent on the far greater losses of life when it comes to people of darker skin.

We are sure that all readers of this report would agree that all wars are horrible regardless of where they take place and that the traumatic effects are equal no matter what the culture is, but still the global culture of discrimination slips in and affects us. We note a bias in the disproportionate number of our own statements towards the north of the equator as a consequence of this global and internal pressure. We are not suggesting that the Federation's work in the areas in which it has been focused is in any way wrong in itself, but that there is a failing in the social work response in acknowledging all people's, their pain and the unique social work responses in the countries that are the most negatively affected.

This issue is something we are trying to put right within the context of our limited resources, and we are pleased to note a recent shift. In addition to a focus on Ukraine and the Middle East, the Federation has worked successfully with a number of its members in Africa and colleagues working under dictatorships in Asia-Pacific and Latin America highlighting local conflicts and how social workers are actively engaged in peacebuilding. It is a renewed start with a long path ahead.

Working in response to natural disasters is also a learning curve at the international level for the Federation. In the last two years, we have engaged in mobilizing funds

to support local social work to respond to massive earthquakes. The funds in nearly all cases have enabled advances that are not so easily achieved in the international humanitarian aid models. For example, social workers working in disaster zones recognise survivors as key parts of the recovery workforce rather than seeing them only as victims. This most often results in the rebuilding of communities, self-help systems, the formation of child protection systems, food security, social economies and the reduction of trauma symptoms. But our systems for tracking and reporting on the spending of funding is weak sometimes causing concerns for both the donors, the local social workers at the frontline, as well as for the IFSW leadership that has acted as the intermediary. It has been a 'learn as we go' process and it is now clearer that more procedures of accountability need to accompany the Federation's newish outward-looking, action-orientated, direction.

These issues we feel should be expected within an organisation that is in a process of significant change. We note that it was only two face-to-face General Meetings ago in 2016 that members unanimously agreed on a new constitution that gave a mandate for the Federation to act, itself on the profession's own principles. We have come a long way in a short time and we all should be proud of such achievements, yet in this moment of pause and reflection in this General Meeting, we also have the opportunity to take stock and consider how we can improve. How we can avoid being bent by global bias, and how we can develop internal structures of trust that give all involved the experience of accountability in the context of solidarity and action.

The IFSW Executive and Working Through Change

The IFSW Executive has met regularly online throughout the pandemic through to today. This is a significant cultural change from the time when the executive primarily met once per year and delegated its day-to-day governance function to the Steering Group. Naturally meeting more frequently, as well as face to face, last May, has meant an increase in robust discussions and decision-making. Most of this discussion has been marked by a high degree of professional comradery and agreement on advancing the Federation in accordance with the constitution and expressed wishes of the previous General Meetings. Yet there have also been times of conflict and challenge which has caused others to want to avoid the challenge.

This is not totally surprising given the tasks and change processes the Federation is undergoing. In the last 12 years, the Federation has grown from 80 members to the current pre-GM level of 151. With the exception of one new member organisation, all the others have come from low-income countries that have weak or absent state welfare states and thus represent stronger community approaches and/or the utilisation of traditional culture in their social work practice. This has from time to time caused challenges for some of the more longstanding IFSW cultures that were once far more dominant in the promotion of 'individualised welfare services for the vulnerable and needy' rather than building with and on organic social structures that have often evolved over millennia.

When others are talking about partnership and self-determination, we occasionally still hear the point being raised, 'We don't co-work with clients, we offer them an expert service'. We still witness people saying that they, 'Will go to another country and culture and teach them what good social work is; because those people have no idea', when we know that such colonial one-way practices are disrespectful, unethical and fail.

While nearly all of our agreed policies have been updated to reflect the role of social work in co-designing and co-building with people, families and communities, we acknowledge that there is still a lingering presence of the 'professional expert that knows the clients better than themselves and does not see local cultures as important'. And at times we have seen this view put so forcefully that it has resulted even in members of the elected leadership no longer feeling confident to suggest alternative views. Yes, at times it has not been easy in the leadership circles and discussions. But we are pleased that the strength and professionalism of the entire leadership has prevailed and despite these challenges, together, we have been able to work through internal conflicts to complete the term intact. It is for us, the authors of this report, a part of the Federation's ongoing change process while holding, valuing nurturing expansion of the multiple vibrant traditions as they change and evolve.

At this General Meeting, we can celebrate all of the Executive and we will thank the members stepping down. We thank Victor Garcia, our Treasurer and Noel Muridzo who held the office of African Regional President. We thank Ana Radulescu who held the position of Global Vice President (2018 until May 2023), in addition to her regional presidency. Also, John Brennan, who served as IFSW European Region Vice President until late last year. We thank Sirganesh MV for his term in office as the Asia Pacific Regional Vice President and Tânia Maria Ramos de Godoi Diniz for her role as Latin American and Caribbean Regional Vice President. We thank Joan Davis Whelan IFSW North America Regional President who also was elected Global Vice President since May 2023 until now. We thank and acknowledge the contributions made by each one of you in strengthening the Federation and growing our profession.

We also give our greatest appreciation to the teams of people who increased their duties during Rory's time of sabbatical. Rory further personally says "A massive heartfelt thank you to Pascal who offered to step up to the acting CEO role during my sabbatical and to Joachim who managed the responsibility of the political leadership role associated with the Secretary-General office along with his own mandate as President. They now know first-hand the challenge of trying to co-lead processes based on the constitution and the profession's agreed principles to ensure all members are equally respected. They have fully experienced that on occasion this leads to having insults cast upon oneself and that, many other times, there are celebrations when all parties feel a part of the solution. In support of them was the Steering Group comprising Joachim, Victor and Joan, as well as Rose and past-presidents David, Ruth and Silvana, Parliamentarian Nicolai and the global Commissioners, Priska, Jane, Vasilius and Hilary and by no means least the

Secretariat staff, Mayaka and Lucia. Without these wonderful people stepping forward to create systems of coverage, I would not have felt able to take the leave I needed. Your care for me and for the high-quality functioning of the Federation is deeply appreciated and the results speak for themselves”.

Looking on to the General Meeting agenda ahead of us we do not wish to detail the news and insights from the Treasurer, regions, and Commissions as it is important that they speak for themselves. We do however give attention to the overview work of the Commissions and the two new proposed internal policies, as well as reporting on regional events, our own visits to these events, and other trips we have made to support members in different places.

The IFSW Commissions and Proposed New Internal Policies

As you read through the Commissioners’ reports you will discover the large amount of work that has been undertaken. This includes cross-commission activities in developing structured programmes that support social workers’ ongoing professional development. In addition, the commissions have been deeply engaged in the development of two key internal policy papers that will be presented at this [General Meeting](#).

Both policy statements were commissioned by the IFSW executive following the last General Meeting. One relates to the structure of the Commissions including the appointment of global and regional commissions. The intent of the policy is to create more consistency, as current practice can be ad hoc and change according to the wishes of individual Regional Presidents. It is hoped that a General Meeting agreement can help both the regions and Commissions to find a common understanding on how representatives are selected and supported.

The other internal policy relates to the currently paused Human Right Commission. It was put on hold by the Executive after hearing of the ongoing frustrations of its members and the lack of clarity on the Commission’s focus. The proposed policies articulate a return to the original focus of the Commission, which is to defend Social Worker’s Rights when they have been abused. We thank Rose Henderson who along with Rory lead the shaping of these policies and also all the Commissioners who had considerable input into the content and direction of these policies.

Regional Events and our Visits Around the World

Despite uncertainty of funding, IFSW regional representatives and local members in the regions have held vibrant and successful regional conferences. One of these was pulled together at the last stage when a pre-planned event in Iran was cancelled for safety reasons. A special thanks to the Eva Ponce de Leon and the Philippine

Association for stepping into the gap, who with the support of Mariko Ohara, Asia-Pacific Regional President, Sriganesh MV, Regional Vice President, the Asia-Pacific Executive, and the Secretary General quickly gave the leadership to build a new conference in another part of the region. The theme 'The SDGs and Social Work's Contributions' was pertinent and timely as it marked the halfway point of the SDG process and looked into the future on how social work strengthens development. The African regional conference also provided social workers in the region the opportunity to examine ways to strengthen our regional internal systems as well as building partnerships for transformational change. We also thank the European region for organising the vibrant conference in Prague highlighting, 'A Social Europe is Possible, Where No One is Left Behind'. And a special thanks to Ana Radulescu and John Brennen for inviting the IFSW Global Executive to attend this event immediately before our face-to-face executive meeting.

The North American Region continued its relatively new tradition of holding an IFSW regional conferences addressing the challenging issues of social work at borders as politicians of both countries' waiver or negate their responsibilities to people's rights. In Latin America, IFSW members gathered to address the region's future plans – one of which, is the World Social Work Conference to be held immediately after our General Meeting in Panama.

As requested from the last General Meeting we also report on the global visits that have taken place in the last period. As Global President, I, Joachim received the invitation of Daegu Association of Social Workers, a provincial branch of the Korea Association of Social Workers in June-July 2022. During my visit I made a keynote address at the Daegu Association of Social Workers Workshop, on the theme: "Transformation to New Era: Present and Future of Social Workers." During my visit, I also visited several organisations providing social work services and interacted with practitioners and service users. In March 2023, at the invitation of the convenors of the Eurasia Forum of Social Workers, I attended the 14th Eurasia Forum of Social Workers in Hanoi – Vietnam and joined social work practitioners to celebrate 2023 World Social Work Day. The highlight of my visit was a tour of a private nursing home for the elderly as well as reading about their wishes and memories pasted on the wall of the facility. It was encouraging to see what social work can do in the lives of people feeling helpless in their old age. In May 2023, at the invitation IFSW European Region, I attended the European Region delegate meeting and shared a global report with the delegates. I also attended a breath-taking conference where I learnt a lot from practice stories and experiences from social workers. In November 2023, at the invitation of the Philippine Association of Social Workers (PASWI), I participated in the Asia Pacific Regional Conference and made my keynote address. I also participated in the official opening of the Philippine Association of Social Workers Silver Jubilee celebrations which attracted well over 3,000 social work practitioners. It was insightful and at the same time enriching to listen to the voices of social workers as well as interacting with social work students. The same Month, November 2023 at the invitation of the ISCTE Instituto Universitario de Lisboa, I Joined the Presidents of IASSW and ICSW in the final conference of the Erasmus+ International Project on evaluation in Humanitarian Action themed; "Social Emergency; Social Work and Humanitarian Action. The role of digital tool to support

complex social intervention in a changing society”. After making my keynote address, entitled “Tapping into Indigenous Wisdom; a Social Work Role in Humanitarian Action” I also joined the Presidents of the Tripartite partners in a round table discussion on the complexity of the emerging social issues in a transforming society. Other than an evening conversation with Master of Social Work students and faculty at the University of Lisbon, my visit’s highlight was the signing of the [Lisbon Declaration for the Development of Social Work and Humanitarian Action](#) in the 21st Century. In November 2023, I also participated in the [IFSW Africa Regional Conference](#) hosted by the Nigeria Association of Social Workers in Lagos – Nigeria, under the theme "Emerging Social Problems in Africa: The Response of Social Work Practice". In January 2024, together with the IFSW Acting CEO, I visited Kenya, Nairobi, to assess the capacity of Kenya to host the [2026 SWSD global conference](#) as well as engage with different stakeholders. I took advantage of the visit to re-establish linkages and networks with our member in Kenya as well as interacted with social work practitioners. I hope that each of these encounters was useful and fruitful for my hosts as it has been to global learning knowledge.

As Secretary-General, I, Rory was able to visit in April 2022 the border of Ukraine and Romania to highlight the excellent social work that was taking place with the refugees pouring out of Ukraine into Romania and beyond, [here is the report](#). In July, again with Ana Radulescu, I visited Ukraine to bring advice and to provide support to the emerging partnership between the Kamianets-Podilskyi district and IFSW Europe. This visit was highlighted [here](#). In October I again visited Ukraine to participate in the launch of the National Association of Social Workers Ukraine and support the work of the Community Social Work Centre as documented in this [report](#). Later that month I attended the IFSW European Delegates meeting in Berlin to speak about the work and aspirations of the Ukraine / IFSW Europe partnership. In November that year, I visited the Malaysian Association, highlighting their work, see the report [here](#). Following this I gave a presentation to the New Zealand Social Workers Registration Board while on trip to my home country. In January 2023, as mentioned above, I along with others visited the Afghanistan Organisation of Social Work as a part of assessing their application for IFSW membership and supporting their work locally. In March that year I was invited to present the work in Ukraine along with Ana Radulescu in Norway and Finland which also provided the opportunity to highlight work [the associations are carrying out in their own countries](#). In May 2023 I was able to present alongside our partners from the World Federation of Public Health Associations and PSI representing global trade unions for workers in the public service in Italy, which is recorded [here](#) and then attend the IFSW European Delegates meeting, regional conference along with the IFSW global Executive in Prague. My final trip before my sabbatical was visiting the Japanese Federation of Social Workers with a side visit to a community-focused mental health service operating in Toyoko and then back to my home in New Zealand where I met with our two professional associations.

Conclusion

We conclude this report by once more bringing to your attention the loss of key members and supporters of the Federation who have passed away since our last General Meeting. John Stark died in 2022. He had been a long-term supporter of IFSW and present at every General meet for decades until 2018 when his health started to deteriorate. Mit Joyner, The IFSW North American Regional President who passed away in office in 2023 and Robin Corrigan (d2023) who along with others played a significant role in developing the IFSW Indigenous Commission over many years. We miss them deeply and also know that their love and gifts that they gave IFSW remain nurturing us all and new life.

We have tried to write this report honestly and openly as possible. Where there has been conflict and challenge, we have deliberately not named names because we have not felt it necessary and have sought to find resolution. Moreso, we see the challenges as systemic problems, after-all, each of us is working hard for a strong profession that can bring a positive effect in the world. What matters, in our opinion is how we respectfully work through our differences rather than the differences themselves. We also note that there are far more engagements and positive life in this Federation than difference. Indeed, the Federation is brimming with enthusiasm and life brought about by the scores of people and members who contribute to discussions, raise funds and offer support to one another in our online social media, in our meetings, WhatsApp groups or privately between each other. This shows that IFSW is a high functioning global community and something we can all be proud of.

Joachim Mumba, IFSW Global President

Rory Truell, IFSW Secretary-General

March 2024