

Opening Remarks: IFSW President – SWSD2024 Joint World Social Work Conference 4.4.2024

Panama City

Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to ride on the already established protocols. Colleagues, we last met in 2018, Dublin, Ireland. During COVID-19 in 2020, we resorted to meeting virtually and learnt a great deal from that experience that we could still connect virtually. The experience was different. You may have heard an African proverb which says, “Knowledge is like a garden; if it is not cultivated, it cannot be harvested.” This proverb holds true, especially as we gather today for our global conference under the theme “**respecting diversity through joint social action.**” You may be wondering why I am so much in love with Proverbs, especially African proverbs? Proverbs are endowed with a lot of wisdom, teachings and deep meaning. In addition, proverbs are an integral part of African cultures passed down through generations for centuries. They reflect the cultural values, beliefs, and wisdom of African societies, providing insight into their history, customs, and way of life. African proverbs and sayings are often used in storytelling as a way of conveying messages, lessons, and wisdom to listeners.

Dear conference delegates, respecting diversity requires a conscious inclusion and involvement of all people, regardless of their backgrounds and differences. It requires a profound acknowledgement that as a people, although different, we can still work collaboratively together to transform the world.

Diversity is important as it recognises unique contributions that each brings; yes respect for diversity calls for the type of leadership and social work profession which is evidenced on ability to learn from others, develop a shared vision, and build cultural bridges. As a Federation; as a Tripartite Partnership; as a Profession and as a People we congregate in Panama City today for this hybrid conference to acknowledge and celebrate our diversity. Respecting and promoting diversity has always been a key objective of social work. Social

workers operate in different practice settings working and intervening at individual and community levels.

Ladies and gentlemen, the theme, ‘Respecting diversity through joint social action’ stems from the People’s Charter for a New Eco Social World and recognises that transformative change happens locally through our diverse leaderful communities. Over a period of this conference, we are going to listen to practice stories from social work practitioners about how social workers have partnered with local communities to undertake joint social action that have led to inclusive social transformation. As IFSW, we continue to impress upon social workers to tap into the wisdom and potentials of the people we serve, local communities and other stakeholders in order to realise an eco-social world that leaves no one behind. Colleagues, we note that sometimes diversity may pose complications as well as create some opportunities. This is because people’s differences mean that they have varied strengths and perspectives and therefore, using and coordinating differences can result in better overall outcomes. The net effect may be that diversity results in innovation, better performance and improved growth at the individual and community levels.

Understanding, respecting and celebrating diversity is a crucial ingredient in sound, ethical social work practice. Colleagues, this is a fundamental requirement for social workers to engage effectively with people from diverse backgrounds and life experiences. This requires an understanding that people are different and consequently exhibit behaviours, attitudes and views that are different from the majority’s.

As I conclude, allow me to remind us that the aim of the People’s Charter for an Eco-Social World is to enable everyone to live with confidence, security, and peace in a sustainable world. The People’s charter drafted during the 2022 People’s Global Summit initiated by 26 diverse global organisations is a living document, which means it can continuously be edited and updated.

The People’s Charter highlights five critical values, which includes;

- a) Buen Vivir, love and care for people and the planet, responsibilities and holistic rights.
- b) Respect, dignity, harmony, and social justice.
- c) Diversity, belonging, reciprocity and equity.
- d) Ubuntu, togetherness, accountability and community.
- e) Solidarity, equality, inclusion, and collaboration.

To attain these values, there is a need for people and all of us to be inclusive in our everyday actions. This calls for adjusting how we live and interact with others around us. The underlying assumption is that, while there is diversity, we are all interdependent and cannot create a sustainable future without cooperation which means co-developing reciprocity, co-building peace, co-creating social justice, co-realising equality and co-living with nature in a sustainable manner.

Ladies and gentlemen, I will be failing in my duties if I do not recognise the political will of the Government of the Republic of Panama, our host through the local organising committee led by Kenia Batista and team – thank you so much, the International Programme Committee led by my Predecessor – Silvana Martinez, a big thank you, Vishanthie Sewpaul - the conference coordinator – you have been amazing shepherding all of us in making this a reality – here we are now, thank you so much. To our tripartite partners (IASSW, ICSW and IFSW), **Where I come from, we say** “Knowledge is like a baobab tree; no one person can embrace it with both arms.” This speaks to partnership and collective engagement you both exhibited, on behalf of IFSW, I am profoundly grateful to you Annamaria and Sang-Mok Suh for your leadership and making this work. This is a demonstration that we have managed to embrace a baobab tree as a collective. **And to all the delegates**, we would not have had this conference without you, thank you very much for making it - both in person and virtually and for electing to share your practice stories. This assures us of the unmeasured growth of our great profession. We look forward to seeing you all in 2026 in Nairobi – Kenya,

Karibu Kenya the Pride of Africa mwaka wa 2026