

Proposed Policy Paper: To be submitted to the IFSW General Meeting June 2016, Seoul,  
following the approved motion at the General Meeting 2014, (Melbourne)  
for the development of a policy on:

## **The Role of Social Work in Social Protection Systems: The Universal Right to Social Protection**

*“73% of world population have no or very restricted access to social protection resulting in the perpetuation of extreme poverty and hardship in the lives of the majority of the world’s inhabitants”, (ILO (2014) World Social Protection Report 2014/15)*

Social security is a human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. States are in the obligation to provide a minimal level of well-being and social support for all citizens. The ILO - Recommendation 202 (2012) concerning the national implementation of Social Protection Floors defines a minimal level of social protection as a right for social security. But governments are free in the way they conceive and organize their national social protection systems.

Following the motion at the IFSW General Meeting 2014 calling for an IFSW policy on “The Role of Social Work in Social Protection Floor” this policy paper comprises two parts: The first **addresses the need for all people to have access to competent social protection systems**. The second part is directed at the role of social workers working with people engaged with these systems. Both parts advance that the understanding of social work and locate social welfare in a broader context of a social developmental model making social protection transformative, leading to positive economic outcomes, to more sustainable, stabilised, resilient and harmonious societies.

Part I: The Role of Social Protection Systems in Sustained Social Development

Part II: The Role of the Social Worker in Social Protection Systems

# **Part I:**

## **The Role of Social Protection Systems in Sustained Social Development**

### **Issues of concern**

The provision of social protection has traditionally been seen as alleviating the impacts of insecurity, poor health, economic and social vulnerability and can help preserve basic standards of living for all. Social protection reduces fears and gives assurance and confidence that such problems do not result in a further impoverishment. More recent debates have raised the question about whether this traditional perspective feeds a dependency model or whether it is possible to construct social protection systems that are socially transformative by reducing inequality and building social justice.

Social protection systems should have a preventive and sustainable effect; strengthening resiliency of individuals, families and communities and enhancing the capability to react to risks of life.

Social protection should better the quality of life of vulnerable populations living in precarious situations that may have few if any resources to help them through the crises and disasters that they may encounter in their life path. Unexpected expenditures including health problems, death, unemployment, loss of livelihood, forced displacement related to violent conflicts or environmental disasters, and expulsion because of development projects cause serious problems for maintenance of quality of life and for wellbeing. In such cases social protection provides security and means to cope with the urgent needs of people.

But this is not the only function of Social protection systems. They should also promote the realisation of basic human rights and make a crucial contribution to establishing social justice. Furthermore social protection helps to stabilize economic development as it has been demonstrated that for every \$1 spent on social protection yields a \$3 return to the economy. As people become empowered they become engaged in economic activity and this leads to increased social and economic outcomes. A comprehensive social protection system contributes to the reduction of poverty, reduces inequalities, contributes to social cohesion, and lays the base for a socially sustainable economic development (Basu & Strickler, 2013).

This policy stands in accordance with prior IFSW policy:

- International Definition of Social Work (2014):
- IFSW policy statements such as those on disability, children, health, HIV/AIDS that are calling for promotion of social protection;

- The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (2012) mentions explicitly the Social Protection Floor Initiative.

The value base of social protection is broadly accepted within the United Nations and its various organisations, in the health and social professions, civil society, and with many politicians but the practice of providing social protection is subject to controversial political debates and the operationalisation and implementation produces a great variety of social protection systems in different countries. Comprehensive social protection systems provide universal protection and in doing so provide for different needs and for different segments of population. They may comprise different schemes and various types of programmes. The financing can be tax or contributory based. The payment of social welfare benefit can be uniform for all or can be means tested. Programmes can be universal or targeted to specific groups. The payment of social welfare benefits can be given unconditionally to all meeting the set criteria's (all children of poor family) or they are linked to conditions (e.g. the children goes to school and is vaccinated)<sup>1</sup>.

Furthermore social protection systems such as outline in the concept of Social Protection Floors are not just stagnant concepts. Social protection systems are developed step by step, reacting to new groups of population and new emerging risks.

The result is that comprehensive social protection systems are very diverse in different countries and social protection systems tend to be complicated. The growing variety and complexity of insurances, schemes and programmes, of laws and regulations, of administrative procedures and bureaucratic decisions often call for social services as link between social administration on the one side and inhabitants demanding social services and claimants for benefits on the others. Social services have a multitude of tasks to fulfil, which may also include navigating complex social protection systems.

## Background<sup>2</sup>

Decades ago the right for social security was enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and in the Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966). Nonetheless the International Labour Organization (ILO) World Social Protection Report 2014/15 "Building economic recovery, inclusive development and social justice" shows that about 73% of world population have no or a very restricted access to social protection systems meaning that three out of four people in the world live in social insecurity if not in extreme poverty and have no access to comprehensive social protection, when they lose income due to personal, economic or environmental crisis. E.g. if there is no accessible and affordable health service for all, falling sick is a great risk for losing one's job or livelihood, habitation and schooling. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that yearly 100 million persons fall into poverty due to unaffordable health costs.

'The obligation to extend social security which is anchored in ... human rights ... was nearly forgotten in the course of the last decades' (Cichon, 2015). The ILO Recommendation 202

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<sup>1</sup> Conditions for payment of benefits in Bolsa Familia in Brasil

<sup>2</sup> This paragraph is partly based on Kuehne in Drolet, 2016

concerning National Floors of Social Protection has the great merit to translate the abstract obligation into concrete policy demands on national level.

The ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalisation (2008) calls for the need for a strong social dimension to counter the negative social impacts of economic globalization, which had become even more obvious in the financial and economic crises in 2008. ILO and WHO were the lead agencies in the social protection floor initiative which found a broad support among UN organisations, governments and NGO as cooperating agencies. With this initiative the discussion and the implementation of social protection systems especially in the global south have gained momentum. In many countries there is a renewed and growing importance given to social protection as a human right and as a precondition for social coherence and economic stability and development. This is contrasting with the recent development in rich countries where the attained level of social security is under attack as result of financial crisis and austerity policy.

The ILO Recommendation No. 202 on the implementation of national floors of social protection (SPF) was adopted in 2012 by 185 ILO member states. SPFs guarantee universal access to health services and income security through the life cycle: for children, unemployed and poor, older and disabled persons. National social protection floors based on human rights have fully or partly been successfully implemented in many countries. There is growing evidence, that they are ambitious but feasible, affordable and effective in the reduction of extreme poverty and of excessive inequality (ILO, 2011, 2014). Social Protection Floors contribute to wellbeing, to gender equality and improve educational and health status in underprivileged and vulnerable groups and enforce resilience in reaction to hardship of life in broad population. Social Protection Floors have contributed to achievements reaching Millennium Developmental Goals and are an essential element to realize social rights. The Sustainable Developmental Goals 2016-2030 adopted by the UN Summit in September 2015 gives a prominent place to social protection to achieve SDG as social protection is mentioned in five different goals and Social Protection Floors is explicitly highlighted as a contribution to end poverty and to reduce inequality for the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

The ILO-Recommendation 202 on the national implementation of Social Protection Floors is the most important and promising initiative in global social policy and has found a broad support among UN organisations such as UNAIDS, WHO, UNICEF, ESCR, HRC and development agencies. It marks an innovative change in global social and development policy away from the primacy of financial issues (Washington Consensus), away from a targeted protection of vulnerable population to an inclusive social policy postulating and implementing social protection for all. In this context the concept note of the World Bank Group and ILO from April 2015 for a shared mission and action plan for universal social protection is remarkable (ILO & Worldbank, 2015).

Furthermore social protection is an important target for the attainment of Sustainable Developmental Goals 2016-2030. Social protection is explicitly mentioned as target to end poverty (1.3), to ensure healthy lives (3.8), to achieve gender equality (5.4) and to reduce inequality (10.4).

## **4. IFSW Policy Statement: On the Right to Social Protection Systems**

Social protection is a human right. The social work profession's core commitment to human rights involves a commitment to provide social protection for all. IFSW calls upon governments and members of civil society to engage for inclusive and comprehensive social protection systems for all.

IFSW will work in the promotion of social protection and calls on its member associations and social workers worldwide to join in this commitment to protect, preserve and expand the right for social protection for all.

In the understanding of IFSW social protection is more than the provision for basic needs. In accordance with the international definition of social work and with the professional ethics and principles IFSW holds that social protection systems must be embedded in a social policy that promotes social justice, social security, social coherence and wellbeing. Social protection systems must be understood as instruments for social transformation, democracy and creating social just societies.

IFSW endorses the **ILO Recommendation 202** on the National Implementation of Social Protection Floors and IFSW urges member associations and social workers worldwide to build on the ILO Recommendation and use it as a guideline to realize social protection in their international, national or local field of activity.

IFSW calls on its member associations and upon social workers worldwide to include social protection in all the activity toward the achievement of Sustainable Developmental Goals 2016-2030. Guaranteeing universal access to health care and providing basic income security for those who are unable to earn sufficient income in particular in cases of parenthood, sickness, unemployment, maternity, disability and old age. These will crucially contribute to the achievement of Sustainable Developmental Goals 2016 - 2030.

IFSW and IFSW UN-representatives will give the social work perspective in social protection high priority in their international activities; they will seek and intensify cooperation with UN organizations concerning social protection, particularly with the International Labour Organisation ILO but also with WHO, UNAIDS, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP and others.

IFSW stresses the importance of training of social workers and calls upon schools of social work to include sustained social development in the curriculum and prepare students in theory and practice to work with social protection systems.

IFSW urges its member organisations as part of civil society to forge alliances with civil society organisations, unions, and people who use services to promote sustainable social protection. Civil society organisations should engage in the national social dialogue and participate in the decision processes, contribute to the conception, development, implementation, and monitoring of social protection systems.

IFSW strongly opposes austerity policy that reduces public expenditure combined with tax reduction for the wealthy, resulting in the widening of the gap in inequality and increases poverty.

## **Part II**

### **The Role of the Social Worker in Social Protection Systems**

#### **Introduction**

Embedded in the social work profession's theoretical and practice understandings is that individuals cannot live sustainable, fulfilled lives unless they are interdependently connected in a social framework. Thereby an essential aim of the profession is to enhance social protection systems so that people are able to live in social environments confidently, securely, with dignity and with the full realisation of their rights.

This approach can differ from the trends of many governments who conceive of social protection systems as top down platforms for the alleviation of individual poverty or targeted harm reduction. While the profession actively supports the development of systems and programmes to reduce poverty and alleviate suffering, the profession goes further than this with the focus on building family, community, societal capital and interdependence as a key first and sustainable form of social protection. This is embodied in the concept of community capacity building

Worldwide the daily work of social workers involves: Strengthening solidarity between people, Promoting people to caring for others, Engaging people to respect the rights of others, Strengthening solidarity within a family, a community and society.

Advocacy is also a key component to the profession and whether working in highly resourced social protection systems, - or in environments where social protection is based entirely in culture and religion, or aid-reliant contexts, - social workers advocate to shape social protection systems so that they preserve and enhance social relationships, promote social integration and make relationships between people as harmonious as possible.

From the perspective of social work, social protection systems and welfare states should be designed to promote the sustainability and wellbeing of the population as a whole. Rather than a strategy that provides relief for people whom have been failed by their societies. In this sense the social work profession advocates that social protection systems are agencies for so-

cial transformation, which centre on building solidarity within communities and between communities, and prompting self-determination through encouraging democratic participation and strengthening voices in wider society.

## **Background**

The social work analysis considers not just the presenting problem from the individual but considers it in the context of the family and community in which the person lives. Therefore the starting points for the social worker are family and community structures. They need to be recognised as the foundation upon which all other aspects of social protection should be built. All too often however top-down social protection systems and governmental policies overlook family and community. They inadvertently replace these organic systems of care with programmes that over time, strip people of the intergenerational knowledge and wisdom that has supported their wellbeing for so long.

There are of course limits to what families and communities can offer and an obligation for the state or governance structures to provide social services to provide specialised services that enhance society's wellbeing as a whole through working complementarily with community needs and community capacity building.

What is important from a grassroots social work practitioner perspective is that social protection systems do not replace the responsibility of families and communities as the first protectors. Rather, that the social protection systems provide more than access to limited financial and medical assistance. They become a platform for enabling people to understand their rights and learn how to democratically shape their environment for the better.

Social workers believe that social protection should be transformational, built from the real needs of all people and the realisation of all people's rights. Too often social protection has been seen as an "end-of-the-pipe" solution, when all else has gone wrong, and labour markets and economies have failed. Whereas from the professions perspective it is imperative that transformative social protection leads the change in all ways of life.

The social work profession sees the potential for social protection to bring about changes in the economy, in democracy and addressing inequalities. We advocate with others that a new conception of social protection is needed. This should focus on preserving society and social relationships, promoting social integration, and making relationships among people as harmonious as possible. It should reflect the need to build on the complex matrix of community capacity building to sustain cohesive societies.

From our professional practice experience we find that people don't want to be in the hands of disempowering social care systems, which undermine communities of their organic means of helping one another. People who use social services and those trying to access them want fairness: a level playing field and equal opportunity to succeed. They want their voices to be heard and to have influence over their own lives.



Social protection built on community engagement and human rights will also go further than economic advantage. It will lead to sustainability and security.

## **Policy Statement**

It is consistent with social work's professional ethics that social workers promote Social Protection Systems to construct systems that transform communities and society to address the root causes and dynamics that undermine peoples safety, security and wellbeing. The professional principles of social work also emphasize that Social Protection Systems are grounded in a development model to ensure social sustainability and maximise the opportunity for peoples self-determination and influence over their own lives.

The role of social workers in social protection systems is to facilitate community solidarity and engagement in the development of systems that will be inclusive for all people and treat them with dignity and respect, and ensuring human rights and social justice. Social workers will bring their skills, knowledge and expertise not only of individuals who are marginalised and excluded, but also of groups and communities to advocate that systems positive address structural, social and cultural barriers.

## **Implications of this policy statement**

In accordance with this policy, the professions ethics and principles, social workers view social protection systems as instruments for social transformation, democracy and creating socially just societies.

The role of social workers is to mediate between state services and family community systems to achieve outcomes that reinforce the capacity of family and community in sustainable self-care and the ability to access social protection systems when necessary.

Social workers use their knowledge, experience and skills to advocate within services to ensure that people who use services are treated with dignity and are able to make decisions with respect to the care that they receive.

Social workers advocate within their places of work and communities that services are integrated enabling maximum accessibility and avoiding unnecessary duplication. As social professionals they encourage that all other professional groups work to co-construct understandings with their clients and work towards the person's self-determination.

Social workers are advocates for the development of accessible, affordable and transparent social protections systems that are embedded within communities and engage communities in the development of services.

The implications of this policy also impact upon employers of social workers. Employers of social workers and administrators of social protection systems need to support social workers as advocates for social development, peoples rights and community engagement.



This policy paper sets out the Role of Social Workers in Social Protection Systems, and advances that embedding social protection in the frameworks of all societies leads to positive economic outcomes, and more stabilised and harmonious societies.

## 7. Date of next review

According to IFSW regulation policies have to be reviewed and updated after 6 years. If the Delegate Meeting in Seoul in 2016 adopt this policy that means that IFSW Delegate Meeting in 2022 has to discuss and approve updating of the policy of social work in social protection systems.

## Glossary

**Social Services:** In this policy the term “social services” is used in a broad understanding including a variety of social professions that are separated in some countries and included under the concept in others such as: social assistants, community and youth workers, social care workers, social educators, social pedagogues, street workers, animators etc.

**Social Security / Protection System<sup>3</sup>:** is the system of interventions, programs, insurances, social assistance and welfare benefits that are provided by governmental, civil society and community actors on local, regional or national level to ensure the welfare and protection of all members of society, especially for socially or economically disadvantaged individuals, and communities.

**Social Protection Floor:** the term is used in this paper to relate to the ILO Recommendation 202 concerning the ‘National Implementation of Social Protection Floors’, comprising a two-fold objective: first to establish basic social security guarantees, which “should ensure at a minimum that, over the life cycle, all in need have access to essential health care and to basic income security which together secure effective access to goods and services defined as necessary at the national level.” And secondly to implement social protection floors within strategies for the extension of social security that progressively ensure higher levels of social security to as many people as possible, guided by ILO social security standards. (ILO-Rec- 202, 2012).

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