

**Speech to the 2014 IFSW General Meeting
Submitted by the Secretary General, Rory Truell**

Dear sisters and brothers of the IFSW family, again it is an honour to speak to the General Meeting.

I would like to start with some brief comments about where social work is placed at the global level.

Social work is a growing profession. 10 years ago IFSW had approximately 63 country-members and now it has over 110. Much of this is due to the realisation of many governments that social protection systems are essential to running vibrant communities and a good economy. This is demonstrated by researchers at Oxford and Stanford Universities who show that for every \$1 invested in social protections systems, there is a \$3 return to the economy, but also that people live longer, with fewer health problems and in communities with reduced stress and crime.

Social workers have instinctively understood this since the beginning of the profession, just as we have understood that the greatest single contributing factor to your health - isn't this medication or that medication - it is the social context in which you live.

Now many governments are responding to the evidence and there is an increasing focus on the Social Determinants of Health. This concept is now a mainstream body of knowledge, supported by an undisputed plethora of researched evidence from the World Health Organisation.

At the global level there is a shift towards investing in social protection in order to maintain a more stable economic environment. We have seen enormous growth of our profession in much of Asia and Africa. In China alone there will be millions of professional social workers in the next few years.

This is good for our profession; it means that our approach is validated. Our belief in the power of interdependent communities, and our learnt experience: that when people have influence over their lives - they are happier and healthier and contribute more positively to society. And we are the right workforce. We have the right theoretical and practice experience to make contributions of significance to people, to communities and to society. I am therefore confident that we will have a strong IFSW, not only for the next few years, but also for the next generations to come.

But our colleagues in many of the countries in Europe have a different story. The countries that have had austerity forced on them by the World Bank, the IFM and EU are critically suffering. Austerity is an economic theory that cuts social protection systems, and at the same time reduces salaries and pensions. This approach will have massive long-term, devastating impacts on the peoples of these countries and also on their economic recovery.

Social workers in these countries work with the implications of such flawed economic theories. For example, there is a new phenomenon in Greece and Spain of middle-aged men committing suicide because there is no work and they cannot provide for their families. Maria Nyman, Director of Mental Health Europe, shows that for every 1% increase in unemployment, the suicide rate increases at approximately the same level. After the suicide of a father and husband, the emotional pain and costs on other services is extraordinary. Social workers (whose pay and hours have been cut) are working voluntarily after hours to assist families from spinning out of control and to try to minimise the ripple effects on the future generation and community.

So at the global level, we, social workers are witnessing a dual phenomenon that directly affects our work. Some countries are cutting social protection systems and some are growing their social protection systems. Lets look at the impacts:

Iceland was rocked by one of the worst bank crises in history, but the people and their government chose not to pursue austerity. Instead they invested more in social protection at a critical time. Consequently, the health and social wellbeing of Iceland's peoples remained as it was before the crisis. But also the economy started to recover, and has continued to recover based on strong and stable communities. Whereas Greece whose economic crisis was smaller than Iceland's at the beginning of the recession, has under austerity a 52% increase in HIV, a return of malaria, raising homicides and suicides – all because the social protection systems were cut. The country's economy is spiralling and the human rights of immigrants and disabled peoples are diminished, as they are the ones who are falsely blamed for the troubles.

These examples inform us that social workers are at the centre of the approaches that work. Our task, looking into the future, is to continue our advocacy for strong social protection systems that are based on the principles of community control, human rights, and social equalities.

I am very pleased to see that we have a proposal from our Swiss colleagues that we develop IFSW *Guidelines On The Role of Social Workers in Social Protection* systems. Because we know that the role of social workers is not just to be passive pawns in government social protection systems. Written into the profession's DNA is the role of advocating for people and communities we work with.

At the world level the social work profession is growing. Social workers are needed and our professional recognition continues to gain strength. But we must continue to support our colleagues and show solidarity with those who still suffer under the economics of austerity.

IFSW's European members recently had the privilege of participating in the Orange Tide. A movement in Spain lead by Social Workers and people that use social work services. This colourful, musical and nonviolent form of regular protest has given the peoples and communities of Spain hope. It demonstrates that people care about each other and have a common view of a positive future.

Without the advocacy of the Orange Tide, social services would have been cut further leading to more deaths, more illness and more despair.

We continue to show solidarity with our social work colleagues in Latin America who are working across the region to build, strengthen and make more democratic the social protections systems, and also to improve the working conditions and wages of peoples. The frustration of Brazil's peoples who live in poverty, has in this month, reached the rest of the world as we view the protests surrounding the Football World Cup. Their frustration, along with the anger of the indigenous peoples whose remaining lands are threatened, bare testimony to the need to consolidate strong social protection systems that in addition to providing social and health support enable voices to be heard and responded to.

We continue to show solidarity with our colleagues in Africa who recently came together in an IFSW forum to send messages to their governments and to the United Nations. To their governments they said that the regions 10 years of economic growth has not translated in social development, but rather into further social inequality. To the United Nations they said that international frameworks needed to be developed to stop multinationals and other countries avoiding paying their taxes when they harvest minerals from African lands. Such tax avoidance amounts to a sum larger than all of the aid that Africa receives and our colleagues are passionately seeking a fair environment where their peoples have the opportunity to live in a socially just and fair environment.

We continue to show solidarity to our members and colleagues in the North American region who are providing social work leadership to address the biggest recession since the 1930s. Social workers in USA have actively supported and championed the Affordable Care Act that aims to make access to health services available to all not just those that can afford it. Also, our member in Canada is promoting a countrywide Equity Framework, and continuing their support for the realisation of indigenous rights.

There are examples of social work leadership that challenge the systems that drive poverty in every region. We have been able to highlight these and many more examples and demonstrate solidarity through IFSW. This year we had tremendous success in demonstrating international unity with our campaign for World Social Work Day. Almost all of IFSW members translated the tee-shirts poster into their own language and said, 'There are social work solutions to the global and economic crisis'. This was a major illustration, of the growth and confidence of the profession. We have positioned ourselves in the debates, where we advocate a social work perspective, at country, regional and world levels.

A further demonstration of solidarity was the support from IFSW members for Filipino social workers who were heroically supporting communities devastated by Typhoon Yolanda despite themselves having suffered great hardships and losses caused by the 300 kilometre winds. A call for funding was made to assist our Filipino colleagues, first with basic supplies, and later with trauma-debriefing and respite care. The IFSW Asia-Pacific region responded immediately and then individual members made generous donations. I want to particularly

acknowledge: BASW (United Kingdom) and the Japanese Coordinating Body representing four IFSW members. It is a great privilege for us all that we are a part of a family that looks after itself in hard times.

I am also delighted that on the 9th July, we along with IASSW and ICSW will launch the 1st Global Report on Social Work and Social Development. This is a bottom up document that brings the social work voice directly into the policy arenas.

We are committed with our partners to produce such a report every two years, and we have now established a process that each of these reports will be launched at the world conferences, and consequently the world conferences will be build around the Global Agenda themes.

Other achievements have been the IFSW Human Rights Commission overseeing numerous campaigns that have bought attention to human rights abuses in many parts of the world. Our UN representatives reminding the global institutions of the human dimensions of policy development. Our journal, *International Social Work* continuing to create space for debate and thought on critical issues, including this week's special issue on the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development.

Each of these developments are our professional stepping-stones for making our contribution to a more socially-just world. In this General Meeting we will fashion more stepping-stones. We will consider the Proposed Global Definition of Social Work, which I believe demonstrates a more inclusive profession that is united in its core mission. We will discuss new policies that sharpen a social work commitment to protect the rights of peoples. We will set in motion our strategies for the next two years and beyond, and we will welcome new members whose voices and experience will enrich our understanding of social work practice and solutions.

Sister and brothers of the IFSW family, while we have challenges, which will be discussed as we work through the agenda for the General Meeting, we have also many successes behind us on which to build an increasing positive future.

Thank you for your time.

Rory Truell