

IFSW President's Report 2016

Introduction

It is two years since we all met in Melbourne for the last General Meeting of IFSW. In that time we have had an exciting two years in a growing and thriving Federation. Our membership has increased and our influence and connectedness is growing. This is evidenced by the increased activity of all our members at national, regional and global level that unites us in that common cause – *The Global Agenda: Promoting the role of social work in sustained social development*.

This is evidenced in a number of different ways. Some have concentrated on contributing evidence of what works in their submissions to the regional observatory reports for the 2nd Global Agenda Report, others have concentrated on sharing their skills, knowledge and expertise directly across national and regional boundaries in response to specific disasters, natural or from civil and military conflict. There is a growing ethos within the federation that everyone has something to contribute and everyone has something to learn. Herein lies the strength of a membership organisation.

It has therefore been an exhilarating task to be the President of such a forward thinking federation of social workers who know that they have a role to meet not only individual need in their daily work but to work collectively towards a better future. We are not only realising that we have competence to make a difference but the confidence to work with others, using our special and unique knowledge for positive change in our world.

The dignity and respect of all people

The theme of the last two years in our regional conferences, World Social Work Day 2015 & 2016, our symposia, through our representation at the UN has centred on promoting all people in an increasing world of inequality, where in most countries the gap between the rich and poor is growing alarmingly. This is borne out by Angus Deaton, Nobel Prize Winner for Economics in 2015.

As soon as our last General Meeting was over in Melbourne the conflict between Israel and Palestine escalated. Using our social work principles as stated in our Ethical Statement we made our first statement and initiated a campaign that was taken up around the world for *Peace and Self Determination*. Support for our members caught up in supporting the victims of this powerful political crisis, not of their making, came from colleagues around the world. Many of us work with conflict day in day out within and between families and communities, we have skills to bring people together to resolve their conflicts and this is what we bring to the macro level in our regional and global work. This campaign continues and has become wider in its application as events like the Middle East and the bombing in Syria, the civil wars in North Africa for example Libya, in Asia Pacific and the conflict in Europe in the Ukraine. Many of which cause the citizens of affected countries to flee as their homes and livelihoods are destroyed and they seek asylum.

This leads on to the next major strand of work within IFSW which has been about what is colloquially known as the refugee crisis but which we have renamed the *political crisis forcing people into displacement and refugee status*. Each of the regional conferences and the World Social Work Day events put together by our extremely hard working UN teams have focused on this issue with considerable media coverage.

The *IFSW Refugee Ticker*, launched after the European Conference is an extraordinary member led initiative and can be accessed through our website. It keeps us informed of the daily changes from

the frontline of the impact of policy and practice changes on the people seeking asylum. Increasingly this is becoming a global resource as more information is added from countries particularly in Asia Pacific. It is far more accurate than the media reporting we see sent to us in our newspapers, radio and television news services.

The reports and evidence collected together for the two symposia we organised at the beginning of 2016 in Athens and Vienna are being brought together in our Social Work in Action book series, that can be downloaded from the website or bought in paperback, and will be published shortly. This work has involved over thirty member countries affected by the displacement of people – from countries that people have been forced to leave, transition and long term receiving countries.

In Asia Pacific and Africa the work has continued on rebuilding communities after the disaster of climate, earthquake, disease or the devastation and the horror of war. They have had a number of seminars and publications on this reconstruction work and many will have seen the DVD made available in Melbourne in 2014.

The pre-conference seminar at the Regional Conference in Thailand in October concentrated on the deep concern about child labour in the region. This has led to a motion to be debated at the General Meeting.

The overwhelming messages from all this work and the symposia is that short term interventions rarely produce long term solutions, the best solutions are built by co-production with all parties, especially those who are the experts by experience, who are re-building their lives and homes. This is the message we have been taking to the UN and the World Bank and WHO.

New Policies

This collecting of information connected to our Global Agenda theme has taken members to the formation of some new policy documents. These will inform how we engage with other partners in effecting change at national, regional and global level.

The ILO resolution 202 constructs the objective that countries should create and maintain Social Protection Systems. In working on the policy paper for IFSW two issues have emerged. One is the role of social work in working nationally on the development of these systems, the second, which comes from collapse of the Greek system as a direct result of the euro crisis and austerity compounded by the tsunami of people rightfully seeking asylum. What is the role of social workers when there is the total collapse of the Social Protection System? The General Meeting will be asked to consider this in the formation of our policy.

One of the political solutions to providing care to the vulnerable is to contract private companies to meet the growing need worldwide. Members across the world have become increasingly concerned that commercial international trade agreements increasingly take dispute resolution out of the national jurisdiction and regulation of the quality of care to offshore third parties. Asia Pacific, Europe, Africa, Latin America are all affected by these commercial contracts that pay scant regard for every person to be treated with dignity and respect.

Finally we are increasingly being asked by courts and employers to do cross border assessments – are we qualified in our training to undertake this work? How best can we as a Federation make sure that such assessments are ethically sound. This issue was presented to the General Meeting two years ago by the Swiss Association and work has been ongoing since then to develop an ethical approach in this international issue. As people move in their ordinary lives across the world this will become a more common issue than perhaps it is today. We need to be prepared to make sure that

people rights are protected where they may be in competition with each other and decision making may need to be made from an international rather than local perspective. In developing this policy we have been very grateful to our colleagues in International Social Service for their help in understanding the complexity of this work.

Understanding our world

The review of the Constitution would not have happened without all the work undertaken by two Regional Presidents, Daniel Asiedu from Africa and Morel Caissie from North America. They deserve special acclamation for not only preparing all the drafts that have circulated over the last year for you to consider but for amalgamating all the suggestions made by members as a result of those consultations. This was a long overdue piece of work that has seen us review our aims and objectives to reflect more accurately our direction of travel but they simplify some of our procedures that had become complex with unclear amendments.

At the last General Meeting two issues were placed before the meeting from two different parts of our Federation. These matters have been considered by the Global Executive and we are seeking ways to move forward.

The first was to think through the new part of our definition about making use of indigenous knowledge. You will be asked at the General Meeting to consider the formation of a new advisory committee to further our collective understanding of how to make use of our indigenous knowledge and from a personal perspective I can speak to the aide it has been to me in understanding social protection systems and how we need to have a greater understanding of how to use that knowledge in community capacity building, creating inclusive and productive societies.

The second issue is about looking at how our present structures enable new members to access all the benefits of being in membership of the federation. In the last few years we have welcomed new members from the Middle East and North Africa whose language groupings are around Arabic. This coupled with the 80 languages of the Asia Pacific region represents considerable communication difficulties, let alone cultural and administrative differences. This diversity not only has to be recognised but welcomed if we are to be a truly global federation implementing our ethical principles, fighting inequalities and promoting peace and self-determination. We are aware that there is already a linking of national associations across the Arabic speaking countries and we are hoping in the next year that we will be able to work with this group to become a more inclusive federation.

Publications

The thinking behind the online publishing of books is not only about keeping up with technology but it will allow us to produce books in many languages to be downloaded locally. Our new series, Social Work in Action, is designed to be a set of practical books about social work in practice. We have already collected and published our current policies and statements and in some respects they chart the development of the federation and the thinking of its members. If you or a colleague want a book published that fits the criteria then this is your opportunity!

Another opportunity that we have created this year is in *The International Journal of Social Work*. The online version is free to all Friends of IFSW through Connect on the IFSW website. We are concerned that to date, despite the fact that this journal is owned by ICSW, IASSW and IFSW and published by Sage it has been mainly used people in universities and not so frequently by practitioners, who are our members. With the agreement of our partners we are now developing a

section on Voices from Practice. This section will concentrate on the issues that we deal with from our practice that may cause ethical dilemmas or be beacons of innovative practice. The revenue from the sale of the journal provide some of our additional income beyond our membership fees so if we can develop this as a 'must have' tool of our trade we increase our ability to develop our capacity to meet our members' needs.

Finally.....

The last two years have felt a bit like being on a roller coaster! I have loved the highs and found the lows thought provoking – relying heavily on that good social work technique – reflective practice. I have learnt a lot from colleagues from all over the world and the different situations we all work in. It has confirmed my belief that social workers have a unique perspective on the world and that we have a responsibility to use our skills, knowledge and expertise in advocating for a better world. We have the competence, now we need to increase our confidence in our place on the world stage in making our global environment a better place to live for all.

I would personally like to thank all the people who have supported the work of IFSW and the opportunities and insights I have gained though being the President. In particular the people who use our services who keep us embedded in the reality that they are the experts by experience; to social workers who have shared their practice highs and lows and are using their skills in effective co-production to positive change; to the volunteer members of our associations who give all that extra time to promote change and support us at national, regional and global level; to the committees of governance at regional and global level – the people who give freely of their time on our executive committees and to the people who support us designing our posters, website and publications; to our Treasurer, Eva de la Ponce and our accountant helping us with the financial obligations; to Alba Rozalen who, supported by BASW, helps me with my administration, translating for better communication our Spanish speaking members and global email box; to Pascal Rudin our administrator and Dr Rory Truell our Secretary General who has steered the IFSW so carefully along an increasingly influential route – recognised by his appointment as an Honorary Professor at Durham University.

In closing this report I would like to share with you that sense of privilege that we all have from the people with whom we work who often share with us their innermost experience of trauma and the fears that is the legacy. Around the world we listen to people telling us about the journeys, through abuse at home, abuse in institutions, abuse as people fight for power and control. We must not abuse that privilege by ignoring what we know – we have a duty and responsibility to work with others to reduce that abuse and work towards positive change. Social workers unite in IFSW to advocate and work towards change – we have much work still to do – but we can make a difference!

Ruth Stark

President IFSW

26 April 2016