



# Social Work and Sustainable Development

## World Social Work Day at the UN in Geneva, 2017 and 2018

### Concept Note

---

Tuesday 21 March 2017, 16.00-18.00.

Wednesday 22 March 2017, 10.00-16.30

Room XVI, Palais des Nations, United Nations Office at Geneva, Switzerland

Dates and location for 2018 will be indicated later

---

World Social Work Day (WSWD) was introduced in 1983 at UN Headquarters in New York by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), later joined by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW). They jointly celebrate World Social Work Day on the third Tuesday in March, together with social work organizations throughout the world, including in Vienna, Nairobi, Santiago de Chile, and for the first time this year Bangkok. World Social Work Day at the UN in Geneva has been celebrated since 2012 on the initiative of the IASSW and the IFSW, which have consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC), in collaboration with the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland – Social Work, Geneva (HETS). World Social Work Day aims to highlight the achievements of social work, to make its contributions and social services more visible, and to defend social justice, social development and human rights.

Objectives of WSWD at the UN are:

- To strengthen existing contacts and to establish new ones; to expand cooperation and partnership with UN organizations and with allied international NGOs.
- To spread knowledge about social work, its values, principles and methods in practice and theory among UN organizations and allied international NGOs.
- To highlight social work actions, policies and achievements in the pursuit of common goals.
- To disseminate knowledge about UN activities, goals, programmes and campaigns among social workers and social work organizations and schools.

### Global Definition of Social Work

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.”

Adopted in 2014 by IASSW and IFSW

The Global Definition of Social Work is the basis for the activities of many national and international social work organizations.



## Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development

In 2012 the international organizations of social work (IASSW and IFSW) together with the International Council of Social Welfare (ICSW) developed a joint policy: *The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development*. This initiative provides a common basis for joint action addressing the major challenges of our societies and identifying relevant social issues for our profession and beyond. The Global Agenda is a strong commitment to promote social and economic equality, the dignity and worth of people, environmental and community sustainability and the importance of human relationships.

The topic of the WSWD is set for two years according to the objectives of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development. **“Promoting Community and Environmental Sustainability”** will be the main topic of World Social Work Day in 2017 and 2018 at the UN in Geneva.

## Background to the Social Work Community’s Commitment to Sustainable Development

1. **Environmental Crises.** Industrialized production and mass consumption are overexploiting finite resources, polluting the environment (water, air, and soil), provoking climate changes (drought and floods), environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity. This development is not only destroying the basis for life on our planet, it also threatens the world’s population as it jeopardizes the resources of future generations.
2. **Social Crises.** Social problems have consequences for all of society. They affect in particular vulnerable segments of society such as people living in poverty, marginalized and discriminated minorities, and indigenous people. Environmental crises often increase social exclusion and discrimination, conflicts and migration at local and global levels. The result is a triple injustice: due to existing inequality and extreme poverty, people least responsible for the environmental crises are most affected by them, have least resources to reverse the situation and are less likely to be reached by counter measures. In some cases, they even worsen their situation (UNRISD, 2012)<sup>1</sup>. Violent conflicts about scarce resources, forced internal displacement and international migration are growing in the wake of environmental crises.
3. **Sustainable Development Goals.** In September 2015 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Resolution “Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 Targets constitute a global Agenda which seeks “to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. They are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental.” Social protection is given a prominent place in several Goals and Targets as a means to achieve the SDGs.
4. **Social Work.** Since the 1990s, there has been growing awareness in the social work community of problematic disconnections between social work and environmental issues. The emergence of “Eco-social work”, “Green social work” or “Ecological social work” signals a new paradigm. It steps back

---

<sup>1</sup> UNRISD (2012). Social Dimensions of Green Economy. UNRISD Research and Policy Brief 12.  
<http://www.unrisd.org/rpb12>



from the previous anthropocentrism based on the schism between humans and the earth's natural resources, the latter being then a mere instrument to sustain the human species. Innovative approaches have been developed that allow social workers to pursue and study environmental issues, to deepen the understanding of the relationship between human communities, their physical

environment and ecosystems. They promote new ways of development that take ecosystems and the balance between human beings and ecosystems into account, as well as seeking to lessen the burden of human activities on the environment.

Social workers (whether they are employed or volunteering, in social services or community workers) have developed several methods and techniques such as individual and family counselling, group and community work, child care and social educational work, training and capacity building, lobbying for human rights—not an exhaustive list. They follow the IASSW/IFSW “*Statement of Ethical Principles*”<sup>2</sup> and the code of ethics provided by their national professional organizations. As a “human rights profession”, social work is well equipped to make a substantial contribution to implementing the SDGs.

## **World Social Work Day 2017 at the UN in Geneva**

IASSW, IFSW and HETS are collaborating with the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) to organize the 2017 edition. Issues of social work in relation to sustainable development will be addressed based on the following question: *What can social work contribute and which competences are needed to implement the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?*

Events over two days will mark WSWD in Geneva.

### **21 March 2017: Cooperation between Social Work Organizations and UN Agencies to Promote the SDGs**

As Helen Clark, Director of UNDP, said at WSWD 2010 in New York: “There are so many complementarities and synergies between the UN agenda and the work of social workers; we must find better ways to work together”. A Round Table gathering representatives of UN agencies will explore these synergies and avenues for cooperation, based on the following three core areas:

- 1) Historically, the UN system has supported social work and training and development in many cases. What can be done to renew, intensify this support and make it continuous and sustainable?
- 2) How do UN agencies responsible for SDG implementation involve social workers? What are the key and unique contributions that social workers can make to achieve the SDGs?
- 3) What are the concrete forms of partnership between UN agencies and social work organizations to build and foster in future?

### **22 March 2017: Social Work and the Implementation of SDGs: Challenges and Opportunities**

The second day will explore the role of social work in promoting sustainable environments and sustainable communities. Sustainability represents one of the most revolutionary paradigm shifts of the 20th century, with consequences for social work as it is closely related to the relationship between human communities, their future and their environment. A keynote speech, followed by a panel will bring together actors in social work training and representatives of the United Nations and will explore the following questions:

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.iassw-aiets.org/ethics-in-social-work-statement-of-principles/>



- 1) Social work and social environmental justice: what are the situated experiences of different segments of the population with respect to environmental degradation?
- 2) What and how can social work contribute to achieving SDGs?
- 3) What are the challenges to integrating sustainability into social work curricula?