

Dear IFSW delegates and IFSW Executive Committee

Dialogues about a review of the current joint and global definition of social work has been underway for more than 4 years, and has been discussed at two consecutive General Meetings (2008 & 2010) and at several regional and national events. Dialogues, consultations and an internet based questionnaire have focused on 1) the need for a new global definition of social work and 2) developing concrete proposals for such a new revised global definition of social work. I hereby forward my *report* recapturing the actual results of the review until now, and some proposals to proceed. I have to apologize for the late distribution of this report, and also that it has not been possible to prepare this report in cooperation with my IFSW co-chair Sâmya Ramos from CFESS - Brazilian National Board of Social Work.

A new revised definition is needed

What is most clear is that we need a *new revised* global definition. Social work has over the last ten years developed, new practices and knowledge occur and old remains. The results include re-conceptualized and better documented practices as well as new social work research in most countries. We need as IFSW (and hopefully also IASSW) politically to recognize this development through a new and updated global definition.

There are now new voices in social work, particularly from the Latin American, Asia-Pacific and African regions, as well as representatives of social workers in indigenous settings. These new voices articulate different perspectives and approaches to Social Work whilst sharing the global social work principles. There are new theoretical approaches adding to our common body of knowledge, examples are new social work research on the social determinants of social cohesion, health and wellbeing, and the need for interpreting traditional social work principles into today diverse realities.

At the African regional meeting in May 2012 the need for a review was frased as “we need to bring in our people and environment into the picture, our land with floods and displacements, we need African life in the definition”.

In some countries the old definition is implemented at national level, for instance in laws and curricula, and therefore tailormade transition plans are needed when a new global definition is agreed, respecting such national developments, but this cannot stop the global evolvement of social work.

Regional, national and local transformation and translations

It is also clear that by having a global definition, we need specifically to leave room for *possible* regional, national and local transformations and translations – recognizing on one hand our common global social work understanding and history, as a global profession, and on the other hand recognize the contextual and cultural diversities, which influence the transformation of social work into a meeting and relationship with local citizens (groups and individuals). This opens up for a more detailed development and amplification of the definition to fit the local professional and political context. By valuing such regional transformations it becomes clearer that the global definition must emphasize the global and general overarching concepts of a definition. At another stage it might be necessary to stay closer globally and grow together, but for now we can celebrate the development and diversity of social work around the world.

Draft proposals to be brought together

During the review process a number of draft proposals have been presented, these have during the first half of 2012 been reduced to *three draft proposals*, which are all listed here below next to the old definition.

Draft 1

Based on the enormous material collected during the review process until January 2012, the first draft was developed by the IFSW Secretariat and me. The view was that to make the new definition clear, cohesive and up to date, the best approach was to reshuffle the words and concepts, rather than making the wording more knotty or adding new sentences. This draft was circulated among IFSW representatives and only few comments were received. The draft was then “overrun” by draft 2, but draft 1 still stands as an example of how to reshuffle the wording towards a new revised global definition.

Draft 2

Shortly after the presentation of draft 1 a workshop on the global definition took place in Brazil, which was widely attended, by countries from the Latin America and Caribbean region. IASSW (the schools) was also formally represented at this event.

Through an intensive editorial process involving all present a *draft 2* was developed, as a new revised global definition of social work *representing Latin America and Caribbean* was agreed by the workshop. Little attention was given to draft 1, but this new definition (draft 2) is brought into the review process within IFSW as well as IASSW, and participants and global representatives did see this as a major step forward in the process in establishing a collective and united new global definition of Social Work. Noting that the Latin America and Caribbean region did not support the adoption of the old definition.

The workshop in Rio de Janeiro was organized jointly by CFESS (the Brazilian Board of Social Work) and CRESS-RJ (the regional Board of Social Work for Rio de Janeiro). Brasil had engaged in a dialogue with other countries and with the IFSW Regional Presidency for Latin America and the Caribbean in order to organize the workshop, and the workshop gathered more than 80 representatives from practice and universities in the regions of Brasil, Paraguay, Dominican Republic, Chile, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Uruguay and Argentina, and from the leadership of IFSW and IASSW. For the latter part the following were present: Nicolai Paulsen (IFSW global Executive member, Chair of the IFSW review team and Regional President for Europe), Laura Acotto (IFSW global Executive member and Regional President for Latin America and the Caribbean), Rory Truell (IFSW Secretary-General, and representative of the IFSW President to this meeting), René Schegg (IFSW Policy and Communications officer) and Abye Tasse (IASSW Immediate Past President and representative of the present IASSW President to this meeting). Apology was received from Gary Bailey (IFSW President).

Draft 3

The third draft was developed by the IASSW co-chair of the review process, Vishanthie Sewpaul (from South Africa).

As IASSW found neither of the IFSW drafts (1 or 2) were easily accessible for their positions, the aim of Vishanthie has been to gather the different drafts and comments received within IASSW as well as IFSW. In this process she has worked with reference to her IASSW co-chair Jan Agten and also the key material

tabled within IFSW. Draft 3 stands now as the most recent draft from IASSW (the schools), but is also still being discussed within IASSW, this include a request to rephrase it in a more coherent language, and secondly see the definition as a high-level definition which needs to be very simple and less comprehensive, and easily translated into many different languages.

Short, clear and smooth language (easy to translate)

During the review process the understanding of a definition has been questioned, does it present the occupation, the qualifications, the competences of the social work profession and/or the global political conceptualisation of the social work profession?

The attached definitions are characterized by many words, complicated sentences, which are difficult to translate. The key request to the reviewed definition is to keep it *short, clear and in smooth language*, to which the commentary as well as a local transformations can build upon. A general, high-level and inclusive approach – focusing on what binds us together globally – means also to avoid defining a long list where a colleague easily will miss one more perspective. Avoid to risk ending up taking bits and pieces from everybody and attempting to stitch a definition thereby. Such a patchwork is not likely to work very well. We shall also avoid terms which immediately divide the profession into “camps”.

The aim shall be to strive for a simpler definition so that also the public knows what we stand for and do globally. Recognizing that many terms that we take for granted as insiders to the profession may just be a jumble of words to outsiders. And if we choose words and ideas that have wide acceptance, it is easier to forge a consensus.

One consideration can be to impose a sentence length limit and also limiting the definition to, say 3 or 4 sentences, as a way of disciplining the continuing work with the drafts.

Introduction and commentary to be update

The introduction and commentaries must be updated following an agreement about the revised new definition. The commentary shall flesh out the detail and substance the concepts and issues included in the definition. There will not be the same limitation to the number of words and sentences, only being aware that the sentences shall be easily translated into other languages. The structure of the revised commentary does not need to build upon the present headings, for instance the clear differentiation between theory and practice is not common today.

Time Frame and Process for the ongoing review process

In March 2012 it was agreed that Samya Rodrigues (President of the Brazilian Association) would join Nicolai as co-chair of the Definition process. The co-chair role was created to acknowledge Brazil’s role in pushing the discussions on the need for a new global definition and their on-going energy and commitment to creating international dialog on this issue.

It was also agreed that a taskforce comprising the five Regional Presidents (or their delegates) from both organizations plus the respective co-chairs.

In the same period it was made clear between IFSW and IASSW that we could not commit to a process of developing a proposed draft definition to be ready in

time for Stockholm. In consideration to our members, who have expectations for this issue to be resolved after almost six years of consultation, it was agreed to attempt to complete the process by the end of 2012, being able to present the revised new definition for World Social Work Day 2013.

The review process is proposed as follows:

- The review is led by a joint IASSW and IFSW taskforce led by a joint coordinating group of co-chairs.
- The IFSW General Meeting in Stockholm discuss/feedback on this rapport, including the three drafts listed here below (aiming at parallel actions at IASSW meetings in Stockholm).
- The IFSW General Meeting does (if proposed and seconded) express its position on
 - 1) The need for a new revised definition
 - 2) A new revised definition must leave room for *possible* regional, national and local transformations
- The IFSW meetings in Stockholm agree a process in cooperation with IASSW for ratifying a new definition at a later stage, presumably at the end of 2012 after a consultation round, followed by a postal ballot.
- That an informal – and preferable open – meeting/workshop is organised between IFSW and IASSW during the World Conference in Stockholm, bringing the joined review process forward.
- The new elected Executive re-appoint a taskforce, who shall refine the draft definitions having received feedback from the General Meeting and any other agreed process for consultation until a final draft is submitted to both IASSW and IFSW members for ratification.

For this report

Nicolai Paulsen, in the role of co-chair of the IFSW Social Work Definition Project

July 3rd, 2012

Definitions to be DISCUSSED and FURTHER DEVELOPED to become a new definition ...

The “old” global definition	Draft 1 for a new revised global definition	Draft 2 for a new revised global definition	Draft 3 for a new revised global definition
<p>Definition of Social Work (2000/2001)</p> <p>International Federation of Social Workers & International Association of Schools of Social Work</p> <p>* This international definition of the social work profession replaces the IFSW definition adopted in 1982. It is understood that social work in the 21st century is dynamic and evolving, and therefore no definition should be regarded as exhaustive.</p> <p>Adopted by the IFSW General Meeting in Montréal, Canada, July 2000</p> <p>Definition of Social Work Jointly Agreed by IFSW & IASSW, 27 June 2001 Copenhagen</p>	<p>A definition for discussion (draft February 2012)</p> <p>Introduction</p> <p>The DRAFT Definition of Social Work has been overseen and coordinated by Nicolai Paulsen who is the IFSW Co-chair of The Definition Review Process. It is presented here for discussion and feedback over the coming weeks. The draft (below) is based on significant debate and commentary that started at the IFSW General Meeting in 2008 and continued through global, regional and national meetings. Parallel consultations occurred within the LA region recently in Brazil.</p>	<p>A proposal towards the process defining a global sw definition (March 2012)</p> <p>The following Definition of Social Work was discussed among the different Social Work national organizations from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Dominican Republic, Paraguay, Puerto Rico and Uruguay, with the Latin American Association for Teaching and Research in Social Work (ALAIETS), with the Brazilian Association of Teaching and Research in Social Work (ABEPSS) and with the individual contribution of many professionals from different countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.</p> <p>This definition will be proposed as the “World Definition of Social Work” to be adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), to be discussed in the World Assembly in Stockholm, Sweden, on the 07th and 08th of July 2012.</p>	<p>A new proposal towards the process defining a global sw definition (June 2012)</p> <p>The following Definition of Social Work was developed by the IASSW (the schools) co-chair of the review process, Vishanthie Sewpaul (South Africa).</p> <p>The aim of Vishanthie has been to gather the different drafts and comments received within IASSW and IFSW, as she has worked with reference to her IASSW co-chair Jan Agten and also the key material tabled within IFSW.</p>

<p>DEFINITION*</p> <p>The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.</p>	<p>DEFINITION</p> <p>Social work promotes socially just and inclusive systems based on capacity building, human rights, responsible citizenship and fair societies for individuals, families, groups, communities and beyond. The social work body of knowledge enables practitioners to work alongside people and communities to support their sustainable interdependence. The profession is guided by the understanding that resourced, informed interdependent people and communities make the best decisions on their own wellbeing.</p>	<p>DEFINITION</p> <p>Social Work is a profession that falls within the realm of relations among social subjects and their relations with the State in the different sociohistorical settings of the professional activity.</p> <p>It develops a social praxis and a set of socioeducational actions that fall upon life's material and social reproduction from the perspective of social transformation. It is committed with democracy and the fight against social inequalities, by strengthening autonomy, participation and the safeguard of citizenship for the achievement of human rights and social justice.</p>	<p>DEFINITION</p> <p>The social work profession, which is contextually determined, promotes social transformation, as well as social stability, harmony, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human and people's rights, collective responsibilities, participation, sustainable development, interdependence and respect for diversities, where doing no harm and respect for human dignity are overriding principles, are central to social work. Utilising theories of the broader social sciences, praxis and a range of socio-psychological-educational strategies, and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.</p>
<p>COMMENTARY</p> <p>Social work in its various forms addresses the multiple, complex transactions between people and their environments. Its mission is to enable all people to develop their full potential, enrich their lives, and</p>	<p>Explanatory notes</p> <p>This 2012 Definition of Social Work takes into consideration changes within the profession at both theoretical and global levels. These are specifically, the growth of the social work profession in low-income countries, new theoretical understanding of</p>	<p>COMMENTS</p> <p>The construction of a global definition of Social Work adopts the principle of unity in diversity. It recognizes that the existence of Social Work in the world is related to the expressions of social inequality inherent to contemporary</p>	<p>Comments to be developed</p> <p>The above definition may be adapted and amplified at national and/or regional levels.</p> <p>PLEASE NOTE</p> <p>If we agree on the above definition we</p>

<p>prevent dysfunction. Professional social work is focused on problem solving and change. As such, social workers are change agents in society and in the lives of the individuals, families and communities they serve. Social work is an interrelated system of values, theory and practice.</p> <p>VALUES</p> <p>Social work grew out of humanitarian and democratic ideals, and its values are based on respect for the equality, worth, and dignity of all people. Since its beginnings over a century ago, social work practice has focused on meeting human needs and developing human potential. Human rights and social justice serve as the motivation and justification for social work action. In solidarity with those who are dis-advantaged, the profession strives to alleviate poverty and to liberate vulnerable and oppressed people in order to promote social inclusion. Social work values are embodied in the profession's national and international codes of</p>	<p>the importance of social cohesion to sustainable well-being, and interpreting traditional social work principles into today diverse realities.</p> <p>GROWTH OF THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION</p> <p>Since the last definition in 2002 social work has grown significantly in Latin American, Asian and African continents. This shift in the global profession has produced new voices, theories and practices for social work.</p> <p>Latin American social work for example strongly identifies with community development and action, and social work practiced in Africa and Asia often focuses on self-determination, spirituality, interdependency, addressing the root causes of poverty and social development. Social workers from these regions have strongly stated that the 2002 definition did not reflect their social work practice context or support their aspirations.</p> <p>Therefore the first sentence of the proposed 2012 definition highlights the common social work values and principles which social workers from the above regions, Europe, Australasia, North America and elsewhere can identify with. These unique set of values</p>	<p>societies and to the means to fighting them, which point to: a) democracy and human rights; b) constitution of a public scope (social regulations and policies); c) international solidarity systems, social security and protection; d) social struggles and movements. These means require specific professional actions according to each country/region's socioeconomic, political and cultural characteristics.</p> <p>VALUES</p> <p>Professional actions are based on ethical values and principles such as: the safeguard of liberty, equality, social justice, pluralism, and citizenship for the purpose of overcoming oppression, hunger, poverty, unemployment, and social discrimination and inequalities.</p> <p>THEORY</p> <p>Global Social Work is based on social theories and specific knowledge in order to analyze and intervene in reality for its transformation. Its methodology is based on a collection of theoretical and popular knowledge</p>	<p>can then begin the commentaries that will flesh out the detail and substance of each of the key concepts and issues included in the definition.</p> <p>-----</p> <p>I drafted the above taking into consideration the submission from Latin America. The addition of "contextually relevant" is supposed to take care of the "different socio-historical settings of the profession" and Latin America's inclusion of social work's relationship with the State. Social work's relationship to the State varies according to context, so it is hard to include it in the global definition. This can be explained in detail in the commentary.</p> <p>I altered the words "socio-educational actions" from the Latin American definition to read: "a range of socio-psychological-educational strategies" as it allows for greater latitude to embrace differences across the world.</p> <p>In the commentary we can indicate that "social justice" includes "fighting against social inequalities"</p>
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<p>ethics.</p> <p>THEORY</p> <p>Social work bases its methodology on a systematic body of evidence-based knowledge derived from research and practice evaluation, including local and indigenous knowledge specific to its context. It recognises the complexity of interactions between human beings and their environment, and the capacity of people both to be affected by and to alter the multiple influences upon them including biopsychosocial factors. The social work profession draws on theories of human development and behaviour and social systems to analyse complex situations and to facilitate individual, organisational, social and cultural changes.</p> <p>PRACTICE</p> <p>Social work addresses the barriers, inequities and injustices that exist in society. It responds to crises and emergencies as well as to everyday personal and social problems. Social work utilises a variety of skills,</p>	<p>and principles binds social work together globally.</p> <p>Social work promotes socially just and inclusive systems based on capacity-building, human rights, responsible citizenship and fair societies for individuals, families, groups, communities and beyond.</p> <p>The last sentence of the 2012 definition also takes into account the diverse cultural and geographical contexts by recognizing that all differing family and community systems provide the best well-being for their people when adequate resources and information is available - and the human rights of all involved are upheld.</p> <p>ADDITIONS TO THE BODY OF KNOWLEDGE</p> <p>Since 2002 a significant growth in social theory has occurred which both validates and advances social work theory and understanding. ‘The social determinants of health and wellbeing’ which have been endorsed by the World Health Organization and many other global bodies, demonstrates that people who are socially isolated are less happy, have more health problems and die considerably younger. Such evidence reinforces the social work position of supporting people in their environmental</p>	<p>arising from scientific investigation and the socialization of experiences. It enables a critical reading of the historical process from a viewpoint of totality, which allows for the understanding of how social subjects (individuals, groups, families and collectives) are part of the social process, prompting the understanding of their ways of life, work and their claims.</p> <p>PRACTICE</p> <p>The professional exercise requires social workers to master the theories and methodologies at issue, and to have technical and operational skills. They must have an ethical stance and specific training to develop the competences and attributions concerning</p> <p>Social Work. The objectives of professional practice are: to strengthen citizenship, the democratic institutions, and the universal human rights; to respect international norms of human rights related to diversity of culture, ethnicity, generation, thought, gender relations</p>	<p>Not sure that we can include democracy in the global definition. Might this not beg the question about what type of democracy – liberal democracy, social democracy, participatory democracy, representative democracy, and constitutional democracy?</p> <p>I did not include “citizenship” in the definition, as it is a contested concept. I don’t think we can include “strengthening autonomy” in a global definition. It might constitute one of several competing objectives and it might not always be the most valued in all contexts. Here again we run the risk of accusation of a Western bias. Especially feminists and non-western scholars, who emphasise relational ethics and interdependence, have heavily critiqued the Kantian view of the “autonomous self”. The use of “social subjects” might also be contested. Many argue that it derives from positivism, where human beings are reconstructed as “subjects”, with the assumption that human beings, like the natural world can be observed, controlled and manipulated – and thus by turning them into subjects we turn</p>
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<p>techniques, and activities consistent with its holistic focus on persons and their environments. Social work interventions range from primarily person-focused psychosocial processes to involvement in social policy, planning and development. These include counselling, clinical social work, group work, social pedagogical work, and family treatment and therapy as well as efforts to help people obtain services and resources in the community. Interventions also include agency administration, community organisation and engaging in social and political action to impact social policy and economic development. The holistic focus of social work is universal, but the priorities of social work practice will vary from country to country and from time to time depending on cultural, historical, and socio-economic conditions.</p>	<p>context and the development of interdependent communities. The proposed 2012 definition therefore states:</p> <p>The social work body of knowledge enables practitioners to work alongside people and communities to support their sustainable interdependence.</p> <p>Other additions to the social work body of knowledge include the explicit need for users of social work services to be at the forefront of decision-making, and that wellbeing involves aligning social, economic and sustainable strategies.</p> <p>INTERPRETING OUR PRINCIPLES FOR THESE TIMES</p> <p>Social work principles have not changed much since the 1950's but are appropriately interpreted differently as the profession meets new challenges. For example many social workers have questioned how one person can empower another, in the same way that one person can develop another. Development and self-power need to be claimed by each person and/or group. Therefore the 2012 definition stresses that when people and communities are informed and resourced (i.e. in control of their own</p>	<p>and identity, and sexual orientation; to support social actions for the protection of socioenvironmental conditions and the fight against inequalities, poverty, hunger, unemployment, and all forms of violence and injustice, with redistribution of income and wealth. For this purpose, social workers must be critical and propositional, with a sound professional training and academic education, contributing to the promotion, protection, restitution and enforceability of human and social rights and the means of access to them.</p>	<p>them into objects of science.</p> <p>The inclusion of “people’s rights” should take care of the expressed concerns that the human rights approach has too much of an individualistic, Western bias. It is used in the African Charter, specifically to embrace the “collective” rights of people, even though the charter specifically includes first generation civil and political rights – generally seen as individual rights.</p> <p>Respect for human dignity has been added as it is a core principle of social work and we can amplify this in the commentary to reflect its unique cultural expressions in different contexts, as so powerfully brought to our notice in the context of Japan. The use of Ubuntu in the African context also bears relevance here.</p> <p>“Doing no harm” can be explained in the commentary in relation to the environment, biodiversity and to people – where all too often there is harm in name of science, profit and cultural norms and practices.</p>
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	<p>development and expressing their own power appropriately) they will be able to provide the best well-being for their people. These principles set the primary tasks for social workers whether they are working with individuals, families, groups or communities – to support people into sustainable interdependence and to take positive control over their own lives to achieve health, happiness and well-being.</p> <p>CONCLUDING REMARKS</p> <p>The proposed 2012 definition and the above three points act as a signpost for the future and the ongoing development of social work practice, theory and education. The definition builds upon the past traditions of social work and recognizes new practice contexts and contributions. It also takes into consideration new bodies of knowledge and provides a unified approach to working with individuals through to societal levels based on development, capacity building, rights, responsibilities and interdependence.</p> <p>It is recommended that another review of the definition is undertaken in 2022 to enable the profession to adapt accordingly.</p>		
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