

## **Report to the IFSW 2014 General Meeting on the review of the Global Definition of Social Work**

*Submitted by Rory Truett, IFSW Secretary-General and Co-Chair of the Global Definition Review Taskforce.*

The review of the Global Definition of Social Work that has been carried out jointly between IASSW and IFSW for 6 years is complete. The IASSW Board and the IFSW Executive Committee are subsequently proposing to their members to adopt a new 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 knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

*The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels.*

A detailed commentary follows the definition unpacking the social work profession's core mandates, principles, knowledge and practice, available on the IFSW website: <http://ifsw.org/get-involved/global-definition-of-social-work/>

### **Background**

#### *The 2000/2001 Global Definition*

The adoption of the current global definition by IFSW in 2000 and IASSW 2001 represented a major development in the profession. This definition has clearly been the most influential and most cited in the literature. The current definition also highlighted the professions commitment to social justice and human rights and has acted as an impetus for many frontline social workers to confront and challenge oppression.

Since its adoption however, the current definition has also come under considerable criticism. This centers on the definition representing a Western bias with its emphasis on 'individual rights', and excluding 'collective rights' and addressing the fundamental necessities for societies to achieve continuity, stability and social cohesion.

A further concern was that the current definition didn't make reference to social work theory and or indigenous knowledge. The latter was of major concern to indigenous social workers who had experienced the extreme negative effects of Western social work models being forced on their communities with horrific consequences, (for example social workers active participation in the Stolen Generation in Australia; and the world-wide indigenous experience of Western

influenced social workers not understanding the cultural significant of kinship and collectivization).

Other criticisms became thematic at the regional level. For example in Asia-Pacific many members were concerned that the current definition had too much focus on social change. Whereas in Latin America many members articulated that there was too little focus on social change.

Lastly there was also considerable debate on whether it is possible to have a single global definition of social work because of the diversity of contexts in which social work is practiced.

### *Moving to a New Definition*

The joint IASSW and IFSW Taskforce reviewed all of the feedback in considerable detail. Indeed, in formulating and testing new versions for a new proposed definition every single word was heavily scrutinised by members in all parts of the world. But it was felt from the outset that a joint IASSW IFSW global definition did need to be maintained, despite the arguments that social work is so diversely practiced that any global definition could not give meaning to the particularities of every region and or country.

To manage this concern the Taskforce included a phrase that enables regional or country amplifications: *The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels.* This inclusion of this phrase was a principled decision taken by the Taskforce to create space for layered definitions, recognising the importance for social work related communities to be able to connect with a localised elaboration.

The Taskforce received submissions promoting a number of profession's principles. These included:

- Respect for the inherent worth and dignity of human beings
- Doing no harm
- Respect for diversity
- Upholding and recognizing, often competing rights such as: individual rights, the rights of the family, cultural rights, groups rights, language rights;
- Emphasizing the co-existence of human rights and collective responsibility,
- Interdependence.

Submissions were received emphasizing that social workers co-construct knowledge with the people and communities they work with. That the purpose of profession is to focus on the cause of problems and not only the symptoms, and that social work is transformative.

The Taskforce carefully wove the information that had been received in the review process and formulated various drafts for testing. Feedback was again

received on these drafts until it was felt that a final draft had been achieved. This final draft has been endorsed by the leadership bodies of IASSW and IFSW and now being submitted for members to vote in each of the organisations General Meetings.

\*It should also be noted that a small minority of members in Europe did not agree with changing the definition and stated that they were content with the 2000 version. They also emphasized concern that the current global definition was embedded in law and changing it would be problematic. Consequently a poll was taken of all IFSW members on this issue and one member responded stating that the current definition was used in their countries laws and therefore a change of definition should be avoided.

### *Acknowledgments*

I would like to thank Vishanthie Sewpaul who was my co-chair from IASSW and the IASSW team who were a pleasure to work with. Nicolai Paulsen who was the IFSW Co-Chair for the first 4 years of the review process and has remained as part of the IFSW Reference Group reviewing the material and testing new versions of the definition. Samya Rodrigues and the IFSW Brazilian Federal Council for Social Workers (CFESS) for championing within IFSW on the need for a new definition. David Jones who acted as a sounding board assisting me to deal with the complexities of the task, and review team: Gary Bailey, Fiona Robertson, Nicolai Paulsen and Samya Rodrigues.

### *Personal Reflection*

It has been an extremely complex task navigating the many passionate voices and perspectives. No doubt there will continue to be criticism of the new definition as there has been with the current and past definitions.

I believe this is healthy and shows a maturity of the profession. Indeed when the current definition was formulated, IFSW had approximately 63 country members now it is over 110 and is growing. These new members bring new experiences and practice wisdom from Latin America, Asia-Pacific, and Africa and it is critical that their perspectives are woven into one of the most important global statements of the profession.

There are many positive echoes of the current definition in the proposed version that sit alongside a description of a more visionary profession that is placed to make major contributions to local, regional and global complexities. The proposed definition notes being both a practice-based profession and an academic discipline. It highlights that our focus is on social change, human rights, empowerment and the liberation of peoples. It emphasizes collective responsibility because rights cannot be realized unless governments, parents, community leaders and people in general - take responsibility for the wellbeing of others. It shows that social work does have its own theoretical base, that we co-construct knowledge with the people we work with, and that we also draw on other bodies of learning including indigenous knowledge.

In my view, such changes show a more inclusive profession, a more confident profession and a profession that is more united in its core purpose.

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