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The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development: A place to link together and be effective in a globalized world

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What is This?

The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development: A place to link together and be effective in a globalized world

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Abstract

The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (The Agenda) is designed by IFSW, IASSW and ICSW to strengthen the profile of social work and to enable social workers to make a stronger contribution to policy development. The Agenda themes and commitments are presented and links with the core global statements are made explicit. The practical, conceptual and ethical challenges inherent in crafting global statements are discussed, including the need to respect regional diversity. The article concludes with a challenge to social workers to help shape the Agenda process and the future strategies of the global bodies.

Keywords

Agenda, global institutions, IFSW, international social work, social development, social policy, social work profession, United Nations

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Introduction

New global challenges in human conditions propel us into a search for new global responses. The worldwide recession, heightened inequality, extensive migratory movements, increased pandemics and natural catastrophes, and new forms of conflict, for example, force us, as social work and social development professionals and educators, to be more aware of global realities and to act differently.

When *The Agenda for Social Work and Social Development* process started around 2004, nobody anticipated that we would be launching this initiative in a time of major financial and social crisis. The reality of that crisis is now generally acknowledged, for example, in the United Nations report 'The Global Social Crisis' (United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs, 2011), reflecting concerns identified earlier in the report of the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization (2004).

In the foreword to the 2011 Report, Sha Zukang¹ (keynote speaker at the Hong Kong World Conference 2010) (Sha, 2010) argued that it is essential that governments 'take into account the likely social implications of their economic policies. It has been shown time and again that economic policies considered in isolation from their social outcomes can have dire consequences for poverty, employment, nutrition, health and education, which, in turn, adversely affect long-term sustainable development' (p. iv). The report found that many governments did not pay enough attention to the social implications of the recent global financial crisis and urged that social investments be given priority in recovery programmes.

The challenge for all of us involved in social work and social development is effectively to build the linkages between the global trends and realities, and the local community response (Healy and Link, 2011; Lyons et al., 2006; Payne and Askeland, 2008; Pettifor, 2004). Our experience is that social work practitioners increasingly recognize the regional and global connections in their work; many understand that 'local' is 'international'. Nevertheless, some practitioners still ask, 'What has international social work to do with social work in my town?'. 'Everything' is the response of the authors of this article.

The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (The Agenda) (International Federation of Social Workers et al., 2010) was developed in response to the increased global complexity in which we all live and work (Jones et al., 2008). The process was also explicitly designed to strengthen the profile and visibility of social work, to develop new partnerships, to boost the confidence of social workers and to enable social

workers to make a stronger contribution to policy development. This represents a re-positioning of the global social work profession, together with social development professionals. The aim is to achieve sustainable, collaborative outcomes drawing on the acknowledged skills of social workers in creating multi-faceted, pragmatic solutions to highly complex problems, both individual and social (Sucharipa, 2001; Sweifach et al., 2010).

Background

The Agenda process started in 2004, arising from a series of parallel developments. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) Executive agreed that the Federation needed to develop strategies to provide clearer professional leadership in response to the evidence of worldwide low morale and loss of confidence felt by social worker practitioners (DePanfilis and Zlotnik, 2008; Jones, 2005; Stevens and Higgins, 2002; Vyas and Luk, 2011). At the same time, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) was exploring strategies for increasing global influence and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) was changing the relationship between global conferences and its advocacy strategy. The three organizations had already decided to hold joint world conferences and the planning for the Hong Kong conference was therefore consciously linked to this new, shared, strategic objective reflecting the new approaches needed to realize the new partnership. The conference programme was shaped to support the development of a world social agenda and the three organizations began examining how the process could be supported and sustained. Background papers were commissioned and published on the website (International Federation of Social Workers, 2010b) and alliances were formed with the UN and other bodies.

The process came alive when around 3000 social work practitioners, educators, social development professionals and policy-makers came together at the Hong Kong World Conference (<http://www.swsd2010.org>) and supported the launch of a global movement led by IFSW, IASSW and ICSW. These organizations recognized the need to link education, social work practice and sustainable social development into a single collaboration. The preamble to *The Agenda* which emerged from this process states its aims as 'developing multiple platforms to foster the emergence of a Global Agenda for the profession through the shared, collective voice of its members'. The shared intention was to engage conference participants and those not able to attend in a new form of dialogue which would identify agreed

priorities and shape the action plans of each organization. This was recognized as an ambitious and daring process, with significant risks, but the conference evaluation shows that it succeeded in large part, at least up to that point.

The three founding organizations represent only the beginning of the collaboration. It is intended that further alliances will be built with likeminded movements to maximize the impact of creating positive social change. Such change will best occur when we can find common strategies that link our work globally with our work regionally and locally.

The three organizations are well placed to support this development as each has formal consultative status with the United Nations and other key global bodies. Each organization also has regional sub-structures with links to member countries and, in the case of ICSW, links with national governments. Many of our members also have these links at national and local levels. This requires new ways of working and forging new partnerships. Whilst there is clearly a need to develop new skills in advocacy and to invest in individual and organizational capacity building, it is also mission possible!

New ways of working do not mean leaving our principles behind. Indeed, our professional principles are fully appropriate to guide us towards working across multiple levels and ultimately towards creating sustainable social outcomes with the people who use social work services.

The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development

The text of *The Agenda* and the supporting documents and action plans are available on the website www.globalsocialagenda.org and have been widely distributed throughout our membership. The core themes identified by the 3000 participants in Hong Kong were subject to extensive global debate and feedback, in particular, widespread debates in schools of social work and social work agencies on World Social Work Day 2011. The responses broadly endorsed the four priority areas, which are:

- social and economic inequalities within countries and between regions;
- dignity and worth of the person;
- environmental sustainability;
- importance of human relationships.

The final round of post-conference consultation culminated in a tripartite meeting in Ghana in November 2011, which resulted in a new platform which identified shared commitments and a renewed determination to promote social work and social justice. The representatives agreed that:

- the full range of human rights are available to only a minority of the world's population;
- unjust and poorly regulated economic systems, driven by unaccountable market forces, together with non-compliance with international standards for labour conditions and a lack of corporate social responsibility, have damaged the health and well-being of peoples and communities, causing poverty and growing inequality;
- cultural diversity and the right to self-expression facilitate a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence, but these rights are in danger owing to aspects of globalization which standardize and marginalize peoples, with especially damaging consequences for indigenous and first nation peoples;
- people live in communities and thrive in the context of supportive relationships, which are being eroded by dominant economic, political and social forces;
- people's health and well-being suffer as a result of inequalities and unsustainable environments related to climate change, pollutants, war, natural disasters and violence to which there are inadequate international responses.

Recognizing these realities, the representatives formulated key objectives related to each of the four key themes of the Agenda which had been agreed in Hong Kong. Each theme targets commitments to three areas. The first set of commitments focuses our joint activities on presenting a social work and social development perspective in our work at the United Nations and other international agencies. The second set of commitments recognizes the importance of strong and resilient communities to achieve stable well-being, and the importance of the role of social work and social development practitioners in facilitating healthy and strong communities. The third set of commitments relates to the internal activities of our own organizations, directed towards ensuring that policies and standards are consistent with addressing the root causes of poverty and oppression and promoting sustainable social environments which make a reality of respect for human rights and dignity. Finally, the platform recognizes the significance of education and training and of the working environment for effective and ethical social

work practice and includes commitments to coordinate research and activity to improve these elements.

The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development: Commitment to Action was formally released in the week of World Social Work Day and UN Social Work Day in March 2012 (International Federation of Social Workers et al., 2012). The three organizations have agreed an implementation strategy, including a commitment to promote a global network of regional centres to support implementation of the agenda and to research the work environments which promote positive outcomes in social work and social development. The Stockholm World Conference in July 2012 will enable participants to focus on implementation of *The Agenda* and strategies for action (Stockholm World Conference, 2012).

Making the links: Aligning global policies

The work on *The Agenda* is only one element in a global review of formal statements about the identity of social work. In parallel to the debate on *The Agenda*, IASSW and IFSW launched a consultation to review the *Definition of Social Work* (Hare, 2004; International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2001) and another to review the *Global Ethical Principles* (International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2004). IFSW was also involved in an internal organizational review prior to the appointment of a new Secretary General, making this a period of fundamental self-examination as well as outward-facing strategic action for the federation.

The current definition of social work has been in place since 2000 (Hare, 2004). In many respects, the achievement of the agreed definition has proved remarkably enduring and robust. For many social work associations, the 2000 definition has served its purpose very well. It has been embedded in the policy of many governments and in many social work curricula. The definition webpage and related journal articles continue to attract a large volume of visitors and readers. However, IFSW and IASSW had the wisdom to realize that the future would present new challenges and therefore resolved that 'it is understood that social work in the 21st century is dynamic and evolving, and therefore no definition should be regarded as exhaustive'. The consultation process aims to ensure that *The Agenda*, the *Definition* and all core documents are consistent.

The acceptability of the global definition has not gone unchallenged. The conceptual problems inherent even in the attempt to debate a single, global definition in a postmodern cultural environment have been robustly exposed

and examined (e.g. Payne and Askeland, 2008; Sewpaul and Jones, 2005). One literature review of the state of social work across the developed world concluded:

Social work is a contested concept and subject to competing definitions. Its language is confusing and contributes to the lack of clarity about what it is that social workers do. This means that there is no universally accepted idea of valid knowledge, skills or expertise for social workers. However, there is fairly wide agreement that social work is committed to rights and justice; and that it exists to assist, support and enable those who suffer from the negative effects of social inequalities. Social work has a function of social integration; it is also widely seen as having the function of dealing with failures in other policy areas such as crime, health or education. (Asquith et al., 2005: 2; see also Fargion, 2008; Payne, 2006)

Whilst the global definition has provided a framework for debate and a target for challenge, the increased understanding of global complexity and the need to work on multiple levels in different contexts has resulted in the emergence of regional definitions, translating the global definition to unique contexts and interpreting it according to local circumstances (Bolzan, 2007). For example, the Brazilian Federal Council of Social Work has stressed the need for the definition explicitly to emphasize the role of social work in developing actions which strengthen people's autonomy, participation and citizenship in order to improve their quality of life (Federal Council of Social Work (CFESS) of Brazil, 2010). Likewise, some indigenous social workers have articulated the need for unique but linked definitions to ensure cultural methodologies are appropriate to them (Cheung and Liu, 2004; Gray et al., 2010; Staniforth et al., 2011; Weaver, 1999; Yunong and Xiong, 2008).

The diversity of interpretation of broader global standards in regional contexts will increase as the profession strengthens in very varied practice settings around the world. The cascading effect should also work both ways to ensure a dynamic interaction between global and regional strategies. Aligning strategies will increase our impact and give more effect to the available resources.

There are similar debates about the extent to which it is possible to promote statements of ethical principles which are truly universal (see for example, Annan, 2003; Banks and Nøhr, 2011; Banks et al., 2008; Healy, 2007; Healy and Link, 2011; Jones, 2011; Lovat and Gray, 2008; Pettifor, 2004; Sweifach et al., 2010). Within the Asian context, many argue that the importance of social cohesion and family stability should be more explicitly weighted against a perceived Western preference for individual autonomy (Alphonse et al., 2008; Hugman, 1995; Liu and Lu, 2007; Sun, 2009) and that traditional spiritual and philosophical insights

offer relevant perspectives for local practice and need to be recognized in universal statements (Hatta, 2009; Liu and Lu, 2007; Sun, 2009). Nevertheless, a four-year, formal consultation about the ethical principles concluded in 2010 with agreement in both IASSW and IFSW that there was no mandate for change. Some suggestions for minor amendments were examined 'that would show the ways in which the core attention to human rights and social justice as the primary values of the profession is not simply a reflection of "global northern" concerns'. However, further consultation suggested that 'these amendments were seen as introducing other problems'. It was agreed that 'this should be kept under review and there should be ongoing conversations about how to ensure that differences of culture and tradition are appropriately addressed' (Hugman, 2010).

The global standards for the education and training of the social work profession (International Association of Schools of Social Work and International Federation of Social Workers, 2005) constitute the third of the global statements endorsed by IASSW and IFSW. The development of this statement also presented political and philosophical challenges, as is recognized in the introduction to the document itself and in subsequent discussion (Alphonse et al., 2008; Sewpaul, 2005; Trygged, 2010). Gray and Webb powerfully argue that 'Global standards in social work undercut indigenous skills and values and negate the expertise of professional judgement' (2008: 61; see also Dominelli, 1996). However, those attending the global general meetings of both IASSW and IFSW in 2004 supported the value of the statement, which was approved with no votes against and only one or two abstentions. Eight years later, the philosophy underpinning *The Agenda* takes account of this discourse and attempts to synthesize these different perspectives, illustrating the inclusiveness and maturation of social work and social development.

Making the links: Regional to local

The development of regional strategies is also increasing in importance within social work and is therefore prominent in *The Agenda*. The development of regional key objectives will assist in creating focus within the regions and will also enable the global bodies to promote targeted regional need at world forums. It is equally important for social work bodies to be visible in the increasingly significant regional structures, such as the European Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

Some examples of recent developments in regions include a specific regional social work response to natural disasters and catastrophes in Asia

Pacific. This included a regional conference on disaster response in Kuala Lumpur in 2007 and the regional conference in June 2011 in Tokyo became a place for regional learning as social workers and their communities recovered from devastating earthquakes and tsunamis across the region (Truell, 2011b). The 2011 regional conference in Latin America and the Caribbean identified the need to strengthen a regional identity for social work in the context of fighting poverty and the need for citizen empowerment (Federación Internacional de Trabajo Social – Región Latinoamérica y Caribe, 2011; Truell, 2011a). The European region has taken a number of initiatives and developed a number of statements intended to increase cohesion within the region and demonstrate the relevance of social work, the most recent being a Charter of Rights for Social Workers (e.g. International Federation of Social Workers European Region, 2010, 2011; Jones, 1997, 2004; Jones and Radulescu, 2006). The IFSW African Region has worked closely with schools of social work to re-launch and support the Association of Schools of Social Work in Africa (Mwansa, 2010) and to support the development of a distinctive African social work identity (Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie, 2011). Africa has also taken the lead in developing a constructive engagement with UN-Habitat and representing social work in the biennial World Urban Forum (Mbugua, 2008).

Each of these regional initiatives will also be promoted by the three global bodies and assist individual local social workers to meet the aspirations of the people they work with.

Making the links: Personal to global

In the introduction to this article we suggested that some social workers may question the relevance of a global agenda for practice in their setting. However, as people move increasingly from lower-income to higher-income countries to avoid poverty, and the dynamics of migration become more evident, no social worker will escape the reality of globalization. When someone (a mother, a father, a sister, a brother, an auntie, an uncle) migrates from one country to another, she or he often leaves behind a caring role, causing increased difficulties for those left in the country of origin. At the other end, in the adoptive country, the person's integration is often problematic, requiring significant social support. There is also growing evidence of increased migration of social workers and other professionals between countries and regions (Carson, 2006; Moriarty et al., 2011; Pittman et al., 2007; Welbourne et al., 2007) and of the personal and moral consequences of these movements for individuals and countries (Improvement and Development Agency, 2006). To minimize the

difficulties for all involved, social workers at both ends of the migration trajectory now need to talk and collaborate. These approaches to social work will soon be regarded as standard, given the pace of globalization.

These are a few examples from many illustrating why the Global Agenda is relevant to local practice contexts: international is local. Making the linkages to support the people we work with or making the linkages to bring global change that will affect local change is now part of the social work job description.

Making the links: Practical to conceptual

This article has illustrated the global, regional and local challenges faced by social workers and some of the institutional initiatives which IASSW, ICSW and IFSW have developed. We have also examined a number of critiques of global initiatives, some of which have questioned the relevance and viability of taking unified global action and making global statements. Whilst we are very conscious of the challenges involved in conceptualizing a coherent global description of practice and professional identity, we have no doubt that there is a real expectation that we will persist with the endeavour in ways which respect the ethical principles of inclusivity and respect for diversity.

Our organizations are also conscious of the challenges inherent in finding common ground between the different elements or specialities within social work itself (Payne, 2005), a process which becomes more complex for all parties with the inclusion of social work, social welfare and social development (Maxwell, 2008). We recognize that there are legitimate debates about the relevance of professionalism and the critiques of a narrow, self-serving approach to professional identity and self-interest, for example, especially in the field of social development (Dominelli, 1996). This is a particular challenge for social work, given our ethical stance in relation to self-realization and empowerment and our opposition to processes of colonization and domination. We also recognize that the structures of social work and the titles used by social professionals also vary within and between regions (for a European example, see Boddy and Statham, 2009; for evidence from China, see Tassé, 2008; for examples from Africa, see Kreitzer et al., 2008; Laird, 2003; Mazibuko and Gray, 2004; and for insight into the Latin American debate, see for example, Netto, 1999, 2006).

Through the democratic structures of our respective organizations, we at least ensure that our global statements and priorities are subject to often prolonged critical debate around the world (see history of advocacy by IFSW in Hall, 2006). We have opened up *The Agenda* process to online

debate and we are monitoring what is written. The leadership of all three organizations is determined to resist a crude domination by powerful voices, but we also recognize that the insidious processes of dominant ideologies can unwittingly trample on weaker voices and minority interests. All members of the global community of social workers and social development professionals have a responsibility to challenge the use of unthinking power and to nurture debate and scrutiny. We all have to be seen to be transparent and true to our values.

Others have persuasively argued that:

. . . despite constant pressures on social work for precise descriptions of what social workers do, the truth is that all social workers know that the very stuff they deal with—human nature—is inherently a realm of uncertainty and unpredictability. No matter how strong the calls for evidence-led practice, and no matter how large the mass of evidence, it is an inescapable fact that good social work practice will forever rest on the ability of social workers to make sound judgements in unique situations – situations which are the complex amalgam of two individuals – the worker and client – sharing worldviews and experiences so as to address the client’s problems in coping with a particular aspect of their life. (Lovat and Gray, 2008: 1108)

However, our organizations are also aware that social work has to survive and thrive in a global, political and competitive environment. Social workers in practice work alongside other professions who may have less reticence about advocating their specific skills, contributions, and self-interest, often at the expense of social work. Whilst no social worker wishes to be professionally defensive or territorial, it is legitimate for national and global bodies to ‘stand up for’ the specific and often unique combinations of insights, skills and expertise that social workers bring to multi-professional teams and environments.

It is interesting, in passing, to speculate about the possible reasons for the apparent reticence of the social work profession to claim credit for its achievements, personal and collective. It has been argued elsewhere that this probably reflects, in part, the difficulty of providing credible ‘evidence’ in an increasingly narrowly ‘evidence-based’ (Gilgun, 2005; Pawson et al., 2003; Thyer and Kazi, 2003) and ‘managerialist’ (Boston, 1991; Harris and White, 2009; Kirkpatrick, 2005) environment. However, anecdotal evidence from several discussions around the world suggests that another reason for the somewhat self-effacing approach of many social workers is that we know, through training and experience, that claiming credit for change which has been achieved can effectively destroy that change as ‘users’ resent the implication that ‘it was done to them’. We learn to encourage and

give credit to 'users' and to deprecate our own contribution, even when in fact it does 'make the difference'. This creates a mindset in which we take a 'one-down' position, always attributing credit to others. It becomes almost unethical to say 'I did that'. The trap for social work is that we do this because it works in our practice – but we also have to learn to be more assertive and to take credit when it counts in other settings (Kidder, 2005).

We do have an ethical and moral duty to make sense of our practice experience and to inform policy development and priority setting by engagement with global and regional political institutions (Mmatli, 2008). We need to speak with confidence about the contribution of social work and social development (Deacon et al., 2009), for example, in the debates about the Millennium Development Goals (Sha, 2010; United Nations, 2010a; World Bank, 2010), health inequalities (Bywaters et al., 2009; International Federation of Social Workers, 2008), social protection (Correll, 2010; United Nations, 2010b) and the physical environment (International Federation of Social Workers, 2004). Several UN officials, including Helen Clark² (International Federation of Social Workers, 2010a), Zukang Sha (2010) and Dave Paul Zervaas (2007) have highlighted the close links between many UN social initiatives and social work, calling for a new partnership. Global visibility and engagement can make a difference in terms of the environment of politics and ideas which shape the evolution of local agency activity and priorities. We should not be seduced into an overly close relationship with those in power, however. Our value base should also encourage us to ally ourselves with community, citizen and user movements and to recognize unique and local needs and interests (Bywaters, 2009; Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006).

We therefore commend *The Agenda* process as a genuine, democratic and determined endeavour to provide a focus for social work, to reassert the specific contribution of social work knowledge and skills to a world in social crisis, and to encourage self-confidence among social work practitioners, educators and policy-makers.

Conclusion

In the title of this article we said that *The Agenda* offers a space for formal linkages. Much has already been achieved with the linking of the global bodies to work together and the existing regional and national structures. Some regions have already started to articulate their objectives based around the four Agenda themes. The next stage involves working at all levels to act upon and fulfil these objectives. This can only happen when all levels participate.

What has the Global Agenda got to do with you? EVERYTHING. Your contributions will shape the strategies that IASSW, ICSW and IFSW will be implementing.

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Notes

1. United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Social Affairs.
2. Administrator of the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

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