

IASSW, ICSW and IFSW establish Global Agenda Observatory

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The three partner organizations – International Association of Schools of Social Work, International Council on Social Welfare, and the International Federation of Social Workers – came together at a meeting in Paris in mid-November 2012 to consider specific actions in the context of the implementation of the tripartite Global Agenda adopted earlier this year.¹

The two days of negotiations resulted in the re-affirmation of the vision of the Global Agenda, which makes explicit the contribution of social work and social development practice in building a ‘society for all’, in which every individual has an active role to play within a fair and just world. In order to gather evidence about the activities of social workers, educators and social development practitioners who support the implementation of the Global Agenda, and in order to give visibility and credibility to their contributions and promote further action, it was decided to establish a Global Agenda Observatory.

This new entity is structured around the four themes of The Global Agenda commencing with the theme of *promoting social and economic equalities*. The themes to be covered in subsequent years include: *promoting the dignity and worth of peoples*, *working toward environmental sustainability* and *strengthening recognition of the importance of human relationships*. A focus on ensuring an appropriate environment for practice and education will be maintained throughout. The Global Agenda Observatory is conceived as a mechanism for monitoring and reporting upon the implementation of the Agenda Commitments.

The Observatory will consist of networks or consortia composed of institutions of higher education and professional/practice-based organizations that jointly conduct research, analyze, synthesize and report on Agenda activities. It also involves a process that will evolve over time. It aspires to establish a strong, credible monitoring mechanism over the next 10 years.

The Global Agenda Observatory will be established at the local, national, regional and international levels, working through the existing structures and work plans, taking into consideration the existing priorities of each of our organizations.

In the light of preparations for the 2014 Joint World Conference in Melbourne, Australia, and beginning in November 2012, our regional partnership bodies have been invited to create regional networks or consortiums to implement the call for national observatory arrangements. The timeline is ambitious: each national network or consortium will complete a draft national report by July 2013. The Global Agenda Coordinating Group will complete the global analysis and finalize the global report by March 2014, just in time for the joint world conference in Melbourne in July 2014, where that report will be launched.

Given the global trend of increased inequality in income and wealth, linked to neoliberal sway in policymaking in recent decades, a focus on equality promotion is important from several standpoints. First, there is a clear connection between decrease in inequalities and decrease in poverty levels. In this sense, reducing inequalities is good for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as well as moving to post-2015 development agenda (when the MDGs will expire) in such a way that will bring tangible benefits to the poor and the vulnerable. Second, according to some recent studies, reducing inequalities is not only beneficial to society in its own right, but also yields benefits in terms of economic growth; even if greater equality might sometimes come at the expense of growth, there is also evidence that under some conditions, and with appropriate institutional arrangements, lower inequality can contribute to greater economic efficiency.² Third, a more equal distribution of national income can contribute to empowerment of people, improving their access to economic assets, providing better opportunities and therefore, widening their options in life.

Detrimental impact of inequalities to human development is clearly visible in the areas of health and education. There exists a sort of vicious circle here when inequalities in access to health care, leading to poor health of the most disadvantaged, affect other dimensions of wellbeing, including education and income levels. Large inequalities in health exist not only on a national level but between the developing and developed countries. Disparities in health outcomes, such as differences in under-five mortality rates and life expectancy at birth, are wide between these two groups of countries. Disparities are also very substantial in the amount of resources devoted to health—both in absolute and relative terms as well as in terms of the share of health expenditures that are financed by individuals.³ Gender inequality which exists practically in all countries, along with widespread gender discrimination in employment and pay, should not be overlooked as well. Income inequality reinforces educational disparities between women and men, leading in its turn to reproduction of inequality.

Empirical evidence suggests that highly unequal societies are prone to numerous social ills that become a fertile ground for intolerance and violent conflicts, particularly when inequality is manifested along ethnic lines, breeding discrimination and exclusion. That is another significant reason why deliberate policy interventions aimed at promoting equality and equity are so essential. The most effective national practices geared at combatting inequality and promoting social protection require monitoring, careful study and wide dissemination by the partner organizations.

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Notes

1. For more details, see: <http://www.globalsocialagenda.org>
2. *Combatting Poverty and Inequality. Structural Change, Social Policy and Politics* (2010) United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, Geneva, p.61.
3. *Implementing the Millennium Development Goals: Health Inequality and the Role of Global Health Partnerships* (2009) Committee for Development Policy, United Nations, pp.8-9, Sales No.E.09.II.A.2.