

Social Work and the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

1. Concern

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were established in 2015. With the 17 goals, the main areas for progress were identified to achieve transformational change in our world. As with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs have proven difficult to implement and gain traction. Poverty, and all the other interrelated SDGs have made little progress. The situation has worsened and some member states have struggled even more during the current COVID 19 pandemic.



The concern from the Social Work profession is that the agenda of the SDGs may get overridden in the aftermath of the pandemic, and the predicted global economic turmoil, that will significantly impact global governance in the next 5-10 years. Unfortunately, we have to expect a devastating negative impact on people and communities with whom we work together, and the gap between the very rich and the majority already living in poverty will widen and deepen the existing inequality gap in societies, locally as well as globally. Additionally, the unfair paradox is that those who often suffer the most from global failures, mal-development and negative effects are the ones who usually contribute the least to these societal and ecological ills, and this is known as **environmental injustice**. This is de-stabilising for individuals and their communities. Such global challenges underline the **need for global transformation**.

This paper affirms to

- a) articulate the support of the UN SDGs by the IFSW
- b) enunciate the social work professional contribution to the UN SDGs

2. Background

Why Social Work supports the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The UN Agenda 2030 is a milestone agreement – never before in history has a total of 193 nations established and agreed upon ONE common agenda. The SDGs consist of three thematic pillars - **social, economic and ecological** challenges, defining 17 goals and 169 indicators to address change. All goals and indicators are of equal rank and interrelated, but their relevance for action varies by country and between geographic regions. The interrelation means that in every change or development, the social, economic and ecological achievements shall be included equally, for instance: no economic goals without social and ecological impact in equal size.

Moreover, the SDGs are now part of the global language among governments, multilateral organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the business sector. Social Workers around the world are already taking an active part, working with their communities to achieve transformational change, as published by IFSW in the Global Agenda Reports, further Social Workers publications and demonstrated in many contributions during World Social Work Days. The concern is that with recovery from COVID 19, some of this positive progress may get lost in the crises that might follow in the projected global economic tsunami.

The SDG goals are ambitious. The Global Civic Society spotlight report of 2019 demonstrated that, despite the great hopes for the UN SDGs' transformational power, five years after the adoption most countries are off-track with the achievement of their set goals. Governments struggle with their attempts towards the UN SDGs transformational vision¹.

Similar negative results have been reported by the UN's own research group in 2019. After having recognized that insufficient action has been taken and many countries are not working towards achieving the UN SDGs, the UN changed its language and called for action on EVERY level: more people need to become active and measures need to be coordinated. The Expert Group Meeting on UN SDGs summarized the lessons learned from the first four years of the UN Agenda 2030, that the:

*"[...] whole-of-society approach is important here, not just to reach those populations, but to empower them and give them access not just to basic services, but also to give them opportunities. Besides that, there is still a high need for awareness raising, among not only societies but also governments."*²

In his call to action, the Secretary-General of the UN calls on everyone across professions, societal levels, regions and nations, to work towards the creation of innovative solutions and strong policies to fulfil the goals³.

IFSW knows that the social work profession can and shall be a strong and recognised partner. However, structural change is necessary on the themes of all 17 Goals that are mentioned. Housing, ecology and social protection are only a few themes mentioned, but there are many more.

IFSW affirms and supports the UN's Social Development Goals, recognizing their momentum and the opportunities they create to foster social, economic and ecological transformational change globally.

How Social Workers Contribute to the UN SDGs

Social Work Definition of SDGs

To ensure an effective use of the instrument the UN SDGs provide to social work and vice versa, it is important to clarify social work's very own definition and understanding of the terms **sustainability, development and goals**, particularly because social work is giving this mandate to itself.

Sustainability Social workers understand sustainability as patterns and policies that establish long-term solutions for the wellbeing of the entire ecosystem, including humans and nature, for current and future

¹ Global Civil Society Report on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs (2019). Spotlight report 2019.

² United Nations (2019). The future is now.

³ United Nations (2020). Ten years to transform our world.

generations. Sustainability includes ways we can reduce aspects of our 'ecological footprint' or consumption patterns to decrease the harm and injustices from occurring in the first place. An ecological footprint is an estimate of the burden we place on our world as we consume energy, food, land, and water. ⁴

Climate change represents an essential global subject. Climate change has now become a climate crisis and is close to a tipping point where unprecedented natural catastrophes must be expected. It is clear that the planet has undergone water, land, and air contamination from travel, industrial pollution, toxic agricultural practices, soil erosion, desertification and destruction of the natural environment generally. Therefore, to have a healthy circle, that people give back to nature as much as they take, that should be the goal to reach. In its policy paper on *Globalization and the Environment*, IFSW calls

"[...] to develop environmental responsibility and care for the environment in social work practice and management today and for future generations, to work with other professionals to increase our knowledge and with community groups to develop advocacy skills and strategies to work towards a healthier environment and to ensure that environmental issues gain increased presence in social work education." ⁵

Development. The best for people (the whole society), peace and planet must be the focus of all activities. Profit of a minor amount of people on the shoulder of the majority of people, is a negative sign of economic-only driven development. For social workers, 'development' is not understood in an economic sense, nor should it define an 'underdeveloped' group or society that ought to normatively reach the level of any other 'developed' group or society. Development is a dynamic all-inclusive process of change, within a person, groups or society pursuing/seeking wellbeing for both people and planet. Social Workers consider various theories, such as the capability approach⁶, taking into account historical, cultural, and environmental underpinnings of societies, therefore social worker's actions are driven by principles of social justice, human rights and holistic and sustainable development to reach freedom and wellbeing⁷. The words 'development' and 'transformation' are closely linked; while development is process-oriented, the aim of transformation is a complete change to an unprecedented situation/circumstance. Both need a vision, and both – in order to be sustainable and the best possible positive outcome for all – a holistic society approach, where communities are involved in ALL steps of creation, planning, acting and evaluation.

Goals. Social workers have and create their very own goals according to the IFSW's Social Work Global Agenda. The Global Definition of Social Work, the Statement of Ethics and the Policy Papers all express our understanding of the needs and purpose of social work action. Our social work approach mainly creates goals in a participatory manner from the bottom-up (community and people-driven) including the knowledge and needs from people (leave no one behind).

Partnership – a basic principle in social work

For social workers, to *partner* means sharing knowledge and insights and collaboratively and coherently creating and establishing solutions.

⁴ See the website of IFSW & Workbook series *Social Work Promoting Community and Environmental Sustainability* and the IFSW Climate Justice Program. *The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development* (2010-2020)

⁵ IFSW (2012). Policy Paper on Globalization and the Environment.

⁶ OPHI. (2021). Introducing the Capability Approach.

⁷ IFSW (2014). Definition of Social Work.

It is in the IFSW's vision and ethical principles that the social work profession fulfils its obligations in working strategically with other partners. IFSW members already work jointly with UN agencies and governments, enabling engagement between communities, the SDGs and other UN agendas. Together with individuals, groups and the civil society, social workers are building the bridge between theory and practice and between local and national authorities. Analysing the structural underpinning is necessary, to protect the communities and to take the unique responsibility for social work to share with various partners.

Bottom-up and top down

Social workers understand that the combination of their bottom-up approach along with the UN SDGs more top-down approach represents the great potential to bridge the gaps between governmental regulatory efforts (i.e. policy papers, global agendas) and practice (i.e. daily work with people and civil societies, operational implementation).

Global policies and agendas also have financial implications – and vice versa. Therefore, the current inequitable global capitalism has to be transformed to a new sustainable global financial system, that bans exploitation of both people and planet, that is based on solidarity, fairness, and the betterment of the whole society and environment. Social workers will continue to promote social change and social development, standing against exploitation of people and nature and against unjust structures that allow for wealth concentration in the hands of the few.

COVID 19 the aftermath of the Pandemic

The world after the COVID 19 pandemic presents itself as vastly different from the world at the time when the SDG Agenda was set in 2015. The COVID 19 pandemic has now superimposed itself as a driver of the global economic future. It has provoked unprecedented social change. At the same time, the issue of Climate Justice has emerged as another major factor, so that the three pillars are enormously visible and important. The visibility on the work of the social work profession will rise. This requires that IFSW continues to address the task ahead and supports these global movements on the previously agreed support of the SDGs.

To sum up, IFSW's goals should be aligned with the UN SDGs because of their value for a global transformation to a just and fair world with the vision of 'leaving no one behind'. The vast potential and global accord of the UN SDGs outweighs much of their shortcomings, making them an unprecedented, agreed instrument for action on every level.

3. IFSW Policy Statement on Incorporating the UN SDGs in Social Work Programmes

The momentum towards a successful and sustainable impact targeted at the defined common global goals of ‘transforming the world’ and ‘leaving no one behind’ is now. Global and national agendas are important for the people and communities and their environments we work with. In this sense, the social work profession is a key partner for the UN SDGs and its ambitions, as it can contribute in relaying and articulating communities’ grievances and pre-occupations with policy goals.

With a social work lens, we promote people’s rights (bottom-up approach) by providing the communities with information and education for transparency and participation. We underline everyone’s contribution and strive to influence decisions at a policy level with regard to infrastructure, systems and services. As advocates for change, social workers further influence transition, impacting the communities to enable transformation to a just, fair, solidary and eco-friendly world.

Social workers facilitate and foster partnerships within communities and between various partners, at local, national and international levels, to translate UN SDGs in various ways (social, economic and ecological) and designing together a new knowledge of sustainable solutions for the implementation action.

4. Implications of this Policy Paper

IFSW CALLS TO

- ADDRESS **opportunities and gaps concerning the implementation of the UN SDGs** that social workers see locally. Last but not least, the government’s accountability and obligation to the objectives of the UN SDGs shall be recognized in a balanced manner (the three pillars) in every policy development, political decision and budget plan.
- RECOGNISE **Social workers** are agents of change – the UN SDGs offer a unique network to liaise with other professions, partners, social movements and *stakeholders* to establish and deepen a holistic and interdisciplinary multi sectoral achievement/approach.
- ASSERT the need for **climate justice that** is affecting the people we work with who, even before the climate crisis, were already in vulnerable situations. Therefore, social workers and their associations shall give strong commitments to sustainable and eco-friendly solutions.
- INVITE **global, national and local governments** to build strong partnerships and to commonly endorse the realization of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Governments shall recognize social work as a human rights profession for the achievement of social policies and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
- ADVOCATE for social services and promote a strong and skilled social work profession and national social work association in order to be visible to partners and *stakeholders*.
- INTEGRATE into **Social work educations, schools and training** the Social Protection Systems, the UN SDGs, as well as the critical guidelines contained in this document into their curriculum.
- **SUPPORT** its members to contribute to a critical analysis of power relations and to actively contribute to future agendas and policies.

Policy Paper: Process lead by the UN Commissioner 2019-2021 and approved by the IFSW global board in March 2021.

5. Sources

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6. Review

According to the IFSW policy paper on policy statements, reviews of such papers shall take place no later than six years after their adoption. For the policy paper at hand, the review will be due in the year 2027.