

## North American Region

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Social work in North America (Canada and USA) is well-established, with formal regulatory systems for qualifications and practice (Shera, 2013). There is a strong history of social development and community organization in both countries, which continues to be supported by established non-governmental bodies, although the prevailing political climate of individualism does not create a favourable context for their work (Taillon, 2013). The Caribbean islands come within this region for IASSW but within the Latin America and Caribbean region of IFSW; the education for, and practice of, social work varies significantly between the different islands of the sub-region (see Latin America and Caribbean section) (Baker, 2013). This section focuses on Canada and the USA.

Canada and the USA have national social work education associations: the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), respectively. They also have national professional associations: the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW-USA). The ICSW member organizations are the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) and the US Committee International Council on Social Welfare (USCICSW). The partnership to take forward The Global Agenda has operated within the existing working arrangements and networks. The regional Agenda Coordinators for the North American region are Dixon Sookraj (IASSW), Winsome Wilkins, Margery Carpenter and Peggy Taillon (ICSW), and Morel Caissie and Jeane Anastas (IFSW). Lena Dominelli is the link between the region and the Global Agenda Coordinating Group.

Both countries experienced the impact of the banking crisis and global recession. Both have a widening gap between the wealth and income of the majority and of the wealthiest. Social workers, educators and social development practitioners supported the Occupy Movement in highlighting the need for business practice to change to a more sustainable, regulated, people-centred environment (Truell, 2012). The reality of the socio-economic situation is perhaps best seen in the number of children living in poverty. In 2007, it was reported that 13.3 million children in the United States were living in poverty, rising to 15.5 million by 2009 as a result of the recession, or one in five children in the United States (Sell, 2010). Both countries have therefore been managing, in different ways, the impact of significant budget reductions, changes in welfare arrangements and the consequences of increasing unemployment.

The representative organizations in Canada and the USA have pursued the Global Agenda themes within the regional frameworks of conferences and networks, including the annual joint conference of the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) and Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW), NASW-USA events, the US Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) conferences and the biennial conference of the Caribbean Association of Social Work Education (ACSWE). The outcomes from these events have reaffirmed the themes in the Global Agenda. ‘Development efforts must look beyond economic markers of success and focus on efforts specifically shaped to achieve the type of economic growth that contributes to social cohesion and human development. . . . Policies and interventions that build

cohesion and address inequality must be coordinated and work under a common framework' (Taillon, 2013).

## Promoting social and economic justice

National social work organizations in the US and Canada have all highlighted the need for changes in national and international policies in order to promote social and economic justice and provide more effective social services. The following is a summary of activities by these organizations.

In Canada, the two national social work organizations issued joint statements on a number of issues concerning social and economic inequalities.

- *Statement Supporting the Aspirations of Indigenous Peoples* (31 January 2013) and specifically the *Idle No More* movement of indigenous peoples. This was in response to legislative changes which privilege economic development and resource development, while compromising social needs and well-being, especially the well-being of aboriginal peoples in Canada. The statement also reiterated the value that these two associations place on indigenous ways of knowing with respect to protection of water, air and land.
- *Statement in Support of Aboriginal Children and Families – National Aboriginal Day* (21 June 2013), strongly supporting the two Aboriginal Organizations (Assembly of First Nations and First Nations Child and Family Caring Society). They have been engaged in a lengthy legal battle with the federal government of Canada over the issue of inequitable funding for services to aboriginal children and families relative to non-aboriginal recipients. The government has ultimately failed to silence the voices of aboriginal children and families and the matter is now proceeding through the Human Rights Tribunal.
- *International Women's Day: A promise is a promise* (7 March 2013), declaring solidarity with all groups in Canada who have been demanding a national inquiry into violence against indigenous women and girls in Canada. Several hundred indigenous women have disappeared within the past few decades, but successive governments have refused any inquiry to examine the root causes of systemic discrimination and violence against indigenous women.
- *Social Workers defending social programs for a stronger Canada* (1 March 2013), launched the official theme for National Social Work Day (March 2013). The theme responded to the Canadian federal government's accelerated legislative and funding changes which have been undermining the welfare state and producing growing income inequality in Canada. The associations called for a national poverty reduction plan to ensure equitable access to programmes and services for all Canadians. Social issues identified as needing particular attention included housing, poverty and child care.

*Social Workers Promoting Equity for a Stronger Canada* (March 2014) was the theme for Social Work Month 2014, reflecting the growing concern at the rising social, economic and health inequalities in Canada and consistent with the Global Agenda theme.

The CASWE Board of Directors will present a new mission statement to the General Assembly in May 2014. This new statement aligns more closely with the Global Agenda commitments, emphasizing the 'promotion of social and economic equalities and global solidarity'.

NASW USA has supported several Agenda-related activities:

- A seminar on 'The Feminization of Poverty: Revisited', highlighted the impact that poverty and income inequality still have on women and girls. Bringing together leading women advocates, health care professionals, economists, policy analysts, government officials and other decision-makers, the seminar explored the progress made since the term 'feminization of poverty' was coined in 1978 by a social worker. To change the differential impact that poverty and inequality have on women and girls in the United States and internationally, it is essential that social workers collaborate with women leaders in other disciplines.
- Lobbying to shape public policies that directly affect the lives and well-being of their clients and communities, working with more than 100 organizations to promote causes important to social workers. Campaigns were pursued on health care reform; immigration; maternal, infant and early childhood health and needy families, among other issues.
- Campaign to improve the working environment for social workers, who face daunting challenges in the workplace, such as low pay, high caseloads, insurmountable education debt and safety concerns that compromise their ability to provide their clients with service and care. NASW worked to promote the Social Work Reinvestment Act (SWRA). This act will analyse these workforce shortage challenges and will determine the best course of action to address them. SWRA was reintroduced in the US House of Representatives and Senate during this period.
- Briefing for law-makers on the strong correlation between poverty and child abuse and neglect. Marking the 50th anniversary of the 'War on Poverty', NASW-USA partnered with the Council on Social Work Education and the Congressional Research Institute for Social Work and Policy, co-sponsored by the National Child Abuse Coalition and National Foster Care Coalition, in conjunction with the Congressional Social Work Coalition, to ensure that law-makers were fully informed about the research and practice knowledge.
- Working with Congress to support the Bipartisan Voting Rights Bill (2014) and to implement the US Supreme Court decision to uphold the Affordable Care Act (2012).
- Policy statements were revised and submitted to the Delegate Assembly for comment and approval. Topic areas consistent with the Global Agenda included: gender, ethnic and workplace discrimination; affirmative action; homelessness; women's issues; women in social work profession; public child welfare; and healthcare.
- Social Work Policy Institute (SWPI) think-tank symposium disseminated a follow-up report: 'Achieving Racial Equity: Calling the Social Work Profession to Action'.
- Supporting the campaign for marriage equality, helping to achieve legislative and court victories on the state and federal level. Marriage equality in the US achieved several milestones during this period and NASW-USA has been active in these efforts.

CSWE published an edited manual, *Teaching Human Rights: Curriculum Resources for Social Work Educators* (Hokenstad et al., 2013). CSWE is a partnership of educational and professional institutions, social welfare agencies and private citizens and is recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation as the sole accrediting agency for social work education in the USA. It requires schools to prepare students to promote advocacy in the areas of human rights and

social and economic justice, although practice is uneven. The new manual should support more consistent implementation.

CSWE published teaching materials and background papers on sustainability issues in social work. The paper examines how principles used in the social work discipline, such as human rights and social justice, contribute to the sustainability model and the 'greening of social work' (Pillai and Gupta, 2013/2014). CSWE also launched online global learning modules for instructors to use in several foundation-year courses, in order to infuse global information into social work curricula. This includes a module on understanding poverty and well-being in the United States and other developed and developing countries. It examines ways for determining poverty using the UN Human Development Index and its embedded measures of inequality (Abell, 2013).

The human rights assessment scales, developed by McPherson and Abell at Florida State University (2012), aim to 'measure human rights engagement and human rights exposure in social workers'.

A core textbook has been updated: *Social Policy and Social Change: Toward the Creation of Social and Economic Justice* (Jimenez et al., 2014). This covers several forms of discrimination, including social and economic justice issues which feature in the Global Agenda.

The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) commissioned two major projects aimed at promoting and protecting social and economic rights by influencing the legislative and administrative processes. *Canada Social Transfer Project: Accountability Matters* (2012) critically examines the inconsistent implementation of the Canada Social Transfer (CST), the primary source of federal funding that supports provincial and territorial social programmes, specifically, post-secondary education, social assistance, social services and programmes for children.

The authors concluded that the Canada Social Transfer is 'a largely unconditional transfer which has no accountability measures for ensuring a level of adequacy with respect to social programs across Canada'. Additional recommendations include clarifying the objectives of the CST system, educating citizens about their rights under the system, and ensuring that funding decisions are transparent and are based on collaboration processes. Calls for the formation of a coalition among NGOs, social policy think-tanks and academics with similar understanding to keep the issue of lack of accountability alive on the political agenda have been successful.

*The Canada Social Transfer and the Social Determinants of Health* (CASW-ACTS, 2013) examines policies and practices in relation to social service funding and delivery, and their impacts on health inequalities. The authors conclude that 'economic and social inequalities are exacerbated by the inadequacy of (financial) benefits', accompanied by the 'lack of accountability and uniformity in social programming' (p. 2). Recommendations for action to redress the situation are presented and will be pursued by CASW. Implementation of these recommendations would bring these initiatives even closer to the intent of the Global Agenda commitment.

The Canadian Council for Social Development is contributing to the national debate about the consequences of growing inequality 'to the point where: economic stability is imperilled, community cohesion is destroyed, the weak lose their dignity or place in the economy, ethical standards are sacrificed, or the environment, including the climate, is put at risk'. CCSD asserts that 'communities thrive when enabling conditions are present. People form community when people have good jobs, meaning in their lives, strong family support, good living standards, opportunities to participate' (Taillon, 2013).

The national organizations in North America are actively promoting social and economic equalities through a range of strategies and commitments. Considerable work is also being done to increase educational resources for teaching about social and economic justice, especially in the United States. However, integration of these materials into the curriculum remains a formidable task. Several barriers exist, including 'access to resources; attitudes of faculty; faculty competence;

and structural factors in social work education' (Healy and Link, 2012: 333). Human rights education in social work in Canada appears more firmly embedded, as many Canadian programs have had a long history of including human rights in their curricula (Hawkins, 2009). Strengthening the human rights curriculum in Canada and the US is perhaps a critical first step in engaging students and colleagues in understanding and implementing Global Agenda commitments.

## Notes

1. <http://www.casw-acts.ca/en/joint-statement-supporting-aspirations-indigenous-peoples>
2. [http://www.casw-acts.ca/sites/default/files/Press%20Release\\_Aboriginal\\_Child\\_Rights.pdf](http://www.casw-acts.ca/sites/default/files/Press%20Release_Aboriginal_Child_Rights.pdf)
3. [http://www.casw-acts.ca/sites/default/files/Press%20Release%20International%20Women%27s%20Day%202013\\_E.pdf](http://www.casw-acts.ca/sites/default/files/Press%20Release%20International%20Women%27s%20Day%202013_E.pdf)
4. [http://www.casw-acts.ca/sites/default/files/Joint\\_CASW\\_CASWE\\_Proclamation\\_March\\_1\\_13\\_E\\_0.pdf](http://www.casw-acts.ca/sites/default/files/Joint_CASW_CASWE_Proclamation_March_1_13_E_0.pdf)

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