

Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development: First report – promoting social and economic equalities

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The messages in this document come from professionals immersed in the real world. We know that our global community can and should provide equitable standards of decent wellbeing for the whole of the world's population, but this is not the current reality. As social workers, educators and social development practitioners, we are working every day with life at its extremes, witnessing the highs and lows of human capabilities and behaviour. We recognise that, for many people, the opportunities for social mobility and full realisation of their potential are beyond their own efforts; family inheritance and place of birth (be it locality, community or country) and access to resources are determining factors for many. We are also aware that being born into some communities makes self-improvement personally challenging and immensely difficult. We are, therefore, realistic about social limitations whilst optimistic about human potential.

The global commitment to respect for human dignity and rights is at the centre of our work, but we live the reality of social injustice. Our experience and research tells us that people, systems and the way we exist together can change for the better. Together, we can create a better world. This conviction is the driving force behind our efforts in establishing *The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development*.

This process is being driven by the 3 main global bodies representing social workers, social development practitioners and educators: the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) and International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). (For more information on the partner organisations and *The Global Agenda* see Appendices I and II).

The Global Agenda process

This, the first report from *The Global Agenda* process, focuses on the theme: 'Promoting Social and Economic Equalities' and has been compiled by practitioners and educators in many different types of organisations at local, national, regional and international levels. The report has been co-produced without new resources as a bottom-up action. It is the latest step in a joint global strategy¹ by IASSW, ICSW and IFSW to address the worldwide dynamics that perpetuate poverty, inequality of opportunities and access to resources, and oppression, and to give greater prominence to the key contributions of social work and social development. It is a major element in a decade-long commitment to focus worldwide attention, over two year periods, on each of the following themes:

- *Promoting social and economic equalities,*
- *Promoting the dignity and worth of peoples,*
- *Working towards environmental and community sustainability,*
- *Strengthening recognition of the importance of human relationships.*

The need for effective and ethical working environments for social workers and social development practitioners, and for high quality education and training to equip them for this globally essential endeavour, runs throughout each theme.

The 3 organisations agreed that we need to create a common platform – *The Global Agenda* – as a basis for advocacy with regional and global bodies and to demonstrate professional coherence, solidarity and credibility (Appendix II; Jones and Truell, 2012). However we recognise that there are competing ideas and diverse perspectives within the fields of social work and social development (Tassé, 2014). Global organisations, by definition, aim to build a sufficient consensus around common values, beliefs and objectives. However, as open and accountable bodies, we recognise and welcome debate and acknowledge that positions change over time; the special issue of *International Social Work* (57(4)) published alongside this report, and the IFSW book *Social Work Around the World V* (Hall 2012), are evidence of our determination to encourage debate and reflection. With all its insufficiencies and limits, *The Global Agenda* process has created a space for debate, within the profession and beyond, with all those committed to social, economic and political justice.

We intend that the reports on these themes will grow in scope and rigour as we develop capacity, drawing from ‘on-the-ground’ experience of the policies and practices which work and those which fail people. A formal process to identify and support 5 Regional Observatories, consisting of partnerships between universities and social work and social development practitioners, is being launched in 2014. These Observatories will together form the Global Observatory, led by the 3 global bodies (IASSW, ICSW and IFSW), which will provide the robust structure and engine for collecting qualitative and quantitative data for future reports and to sustain the debate. This report is based on submissions from the 5 regions (Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America), drawing on evidence from written and other submissions, surveys, conference presentations and discussions, and existing knowledge and literature, including information from most of the countries in each region.

Social work, social development and promoting equalities

Social workers operate at the point where social forces and individual behaviour meet (IFSW/IASSW, 2000); they work with the consequences of both human choice and social disadvantage. We know that improving the well-being of people, families and communities requires a conducive, just and fair social environment within which people can make their own choices. ‘Promoting social and economic equalities’ was chosen as the first *Global Agenda* theme to focus on the major causes that constrain individual opportunity, human development, and care of the earth’s ecosystem and keep people in poverty and disadvantage. The theme includes advocacy for the realisation of human rights for all peoples; a socially-just international economy; the development of socio-economic structures that ensure environmental sustainability; and the recognition that social cohesion and institutional solidarity must be at the forefront of policy and government decisions. These broad social realities provide the context within which people decide how to live their lives.

Widening social and economic inequality within most countries and across the world is now well-documented and unarguable (UNDP, 2013). There has been a deluge of international reports and research studies all pointing in the same direction (e.g. Milanovic, 2011, 2012; Wilkinson, 2009; Stiglitz, 2012). A recent UN report argued that ‘inequality does not affect only the poor, but can be detrimental to growth, stability and well-being in general’ (UN DESA, 2013). Welcoming *The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development*, Helen Clark (head of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)) said:

We, like you, base our work on empowering individuals and communities. At the heart of the concept of human development is an acknowledgement of the importance of people being able to live lives which they choose and value. At the heart of our work is engaging communities in voicing what they want their future to look like. (World Social Work Day, 26 March 2012 UN, New York)

‘There is growing global consensus on the need to bridge the divide between the haves and the have-nots’ (Hongbo (UN DESA), 2013: 5) and on the likely consequences of this trend. This is seen, for example, in the groundswell of support for the International Labour Conference Recommendation 202 (June 2012) concerning National Floors of Social Protection that every country should establish and maintain their social protection floors comprising basic social security guarantees. The guarantees should ensure, at a minimum that, ‘over the life cycle, all in need have access to essential health care and to basic income security’ (ILO, 2012). The Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors created in 2012 and comprising more than 70 NGOs and social movements has proposed that Social Protection Floors initiative should be an integral part of the post-2015 global development framework.

Strong political and economic voices are raised defending growing inequality, however, and blaming disadvantaged people for their own fate. Nevertheless, robust evidence demonstrates that ‘growing inequalities can be arrested by integrated policies that are universal in principle while paying particular attention to the needs of disadvantaged and marginalized populations’ (UN DESA, 2013; see also Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). That is one of the key factors underpinning the campaign initiated by the ILO to consider social security as an investment in people, reaffirming that the right to social security is a human right and an economic and social necessity for development and progress.

This report addresses the social consequences of the well-documented reality of growing inequality and some responses to it. Social work and social development practitioners are not normally involved in global, macroeconomic decisions (Davies, 1985). However practitioners do bear witness to their social consequences and realities on a daily basis and have a duty to provide feedback about the outcomes of social policies. We observe that unreliable, unequal, fluctuating societies undermine health and well-being and erode the potential for positive futures and that these instabilities are often driven by macroeconomic decisions. Thus, as professionals who work with complex and interlocking systems, we are compelled to advocate for the principles of respect for people and social justice and to develop the beginning of a social work and social development perspective on the social elements of economic regulation and deregulation and their impact on human wellbeing and the physical environment (Dominelli, 2012; Shajahan, 2013; Truell, 2013a).

Since the 1980s, financial turbulence has become a permanent feature of the world economy; in 2008-9 the world went through its worst financial and economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s (International Labour Organisation, 2011). These often rapid macro changes inevitably have devastating social consequences for individuals and communities. On average, it takes two years to create the problem and 4.8 years for employment to recover to pre-crisis levels (ILO, 2011). Each time this happens, large numbers of people become unemployed, homeless and insecure, families are torn apart, children lose educational opportunities and death rates increase. The economic environment leaves a trail of misery and damaged lives.

How do governments and the international economic frameworks respond? Typically they tend to seek short-term solutions that often aggravate the problems. For example, the current pursuit of ‘austerity’ and ‘competition’ in Europe and elsewhere has not produced the anticipated growth that politicians’ desire, mirroring the experience of countries which were subjected to World Bank ‘structural adjustment’ policies in earlier decades. Austerity policies are driving massive job losses,

wage reductions, price increases, significant migrations, loss of the skilled workforce, business failure and increased inequality. Many people have lost access to adequate housing, health care and education services, with lasting implications for future generations. This has caused major dislocation for so-called 'vulnerable groups', such as people with disabilities, chronic health conditions, mental health problems or parenting problems, frail older people and those coming out of prison, some of whom have lost all the support which enabled them to have any quality of life (IFSW, 2013; Lavalette and Ioakimidis, 2011).

These social trends are reflected in different ways in the global regions. The regional perspectives which follow draw on the regional reports which are built on information gathered from all parts of the world. Detailed information and references for projects are included in the regional reports.

Regional perspectives

Africa

Africa has witnessed a period of significant economic growth, driven largely by rising commodity prices, but the fruits of this growth have been shared unequally and the distribution of wealth has become more unequal within most countries (Africa Progress Panel, 2013b). Social development activity is well-recognised throughout Africa, delivered by a range of agencies and professionals, including social development and social work practitioners. Social work is an established, but mostly an unregulated profession in the continent. Some national governments are discussing formal regulation of title and qualifications, as has been achieved in South Africa (Osei-Hwedie, 2013).

Social workers, educators and social development practitioners have worked together on *The Global Agenda* theme across the region. Two conferences drew practitioners and educators together, raising awareness of the *Global Agenda* and assisting the development of a regional overview on promoting social and economic equalities. The International Consortium for Social Development (ICSD) conference was held in Uganda in July 2013² and the 'Voices for Development' conference in Johannesburg in September 2013.³ These events provided a platform for the views of the people who are the targets of international policy, voicing their aspirations for what should follow the MDGs in 2015 and contributing to the UN process.

Delegates in Johannesburg responded with a set of key messages to the international community that address the major causes of regional poverty and exploitation. These include the need for global frameworks of agreed fair taxing and just trade systems so that Africa does not continue to be exploited by international companies (Mason, 2004; Truell, 2013b).

Concern was expressed that improvement in the social and economic conditions of the vast majority of people has not matched the economic growth in Africa over the last 10 years. Instead of equal benefits for all, the wealth has gone to a small minority, including multi-nationals and offshore investors from the mining and mineral extraction industry who avoid paying proportionate taxes that would otherwise enable governments to invest in the well-being of people. Documenting these trends, the Africa Progress Report (Africa Progress Panel, 2013a) also shows that more money is taken out of Africa through tax avoidance than all monies received from aid. Social workers called on the UN and other international agencies to develop new regulations that call the multinationals to account and build the foundations for regional economic and social prosperity (Truell, 2013b).

Social workers at the conference also had messages for their own governments on the need to see the links between economic growth and social development. They said that there was little evidence that regional economic growth was benefiting the lives of the majority of people (Truell,

2013b). There was however clear evidence of significantly growing inequality (World Bank, 2013; Africa Progress Panel, 2013). The experience of grassroots social workers resonated with academic research showing that people are happier and their well-being greater in more equitable societies. And when economic growth is not linked to improving social conditions, suffering and wellbeing can worsen (Mwansa, 2015).

Delegates also reminded governments and international agencies that they cannot 'develop' other people. Many decades of experience has informed social work practice that people who are the targets of development policy need to be engaged in the policy frameworks from the beginning and that solutions have to be locally driven. Including people, developing shared visions and empowering them to be in charge of their own environments and futures will always have greater impact than rolling strategies upon them.

Asia-Pacific

The Asia-Pacific region includes a wide diversity of countries, regions and socio-economic environments, including seven of the 10 most populous countries as well as the smallest, some of the poorest countries and some of the fastest growing economies in the world. The Middle East and parts of the Indian subcontinent continue to suffer from serious political conflict and lack of development, China and some other countries have seen rapid growth (up to around 8% per year), Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa have not suffered the extremes of financial crisis seen in some other developed economies, whilst the Japanese economy was adversely affected by the 2011 tsunami. Inequality in wealth and income has increased within all countries. About 20% of total income went to the wealthiest 5% in most countries, and the share of income accruing to the richest households has increased more than three times in Asia's largest and most diverse countries: China, India and Indonesia (Asian Development Bank 2012). The Gini coefficient (standard measure of inequality) has leapt across the whole region from 39 to 46 in the last two decades.

The development of social work is also very varied within such a diverse 'region'. Social work is formally regulated in Australia (Gray, 2013), New Zealand/Aotearoa, Japan and South Korea, with legislation being discussed in Malaysia. There has been a rapid growth in the number of schools of social work in China, with a similar trend in Vietnam, whilst India continues to produce a large number of qualified social workers (Tan, 2013). Middle Eastern countries, such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia, are investing more in professional social work (Graham, 2013). The profession has low status in countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal, although qualified social workers are employed, mainly delivering social development through NGOs. In some countries, the narrowly defined and tightly managed role of social workers, with limited resources, makes it difficult to envision how they could address *The Global Agenda* in daily practice (Nikku, 2013).

The region has seen a number of *Global Agenda* related events. Annual Government-NGO forums to discuss welfare and equity were held in Hanoi, Vietnam in 2012 and Siem Reap, Cambodia in 2013. The biannual regional social work conference in Tokyo in 2011 focussed on The Agenda and a regional consultation in Indonesia on environmental issues and disaster response (an Agenda element) was held in 2013. A number of national workshops on the Social Protection Floor (SPF) and work with vulnerable groups took place, linked to Agenda themes. The ASEAN Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2011-2020) has provided a focus for Agenda themes. A regional conference on 'Social Protection: Perspectives and Policies', was held in Kuttikkanam, Kerala, India, in December 2012 and on long-term care of older persons in Seoul, Korea in June 2013. A tripartite conference on Agenda themes was held in Nepal. Preliminary

discussions about strategic *Global Agenda* partnerships between regional members of the 3 global bodies have been initiated.

Disaster response has been a specific focus of the region, reflecting recent experience. There is clear evidence from disasters in Aceh, Japan and The Philippines that, where local people supported by social workers are directly involved in recovery and reconstruction, including decisions about relocation where necessary, the recovery is quicker and more robust (Truell, 2014a).

Examples of community participation in 'bottom-up' consultation are also evident. For example, a 'Low Level Panel' was convened in India, supported by the UN, including older people, people with disabilities, young people and people from the LGBT community (Praxis, 2013). The group reviewed the MDGs, developed proposals for post-2015 priorities and made recommendations to the UN in a process supported by social work and development practitioners. A similar project involved tribal peoples in north India in a consultation about their future and their rights.

The social work associations in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa have stimulated discussions around Agenda themes and professional groups have consistently confronted inequality arising from lack of respect for the rights of indigenous peoples.

Europe

Social work is a major element in the welfare models across Europe (Lorenz, 1994; Jones, 2013) but service quality has been reduced by the 2008/9 financial crisis, to a greater or lesser extent. Negative consequences of the crisis experienced across Europe include a widening of economic and social inequality, with a universal government focus on reducing financial benefits and cutting social services. In this negative context, the European region considered the *Global Agenda* process at the bi-annual ENSACT⁴ conference in Istanbul in April 2013 and through the EASSW⁵ call for submissions, an IFSW regional project on *Economic Crisis in Europe – Challenge and Response of the Social Work Profession* (IFSW Europe, 2014) and ICSW regional consultations.

Practitioners in austerity-affected countries have witnessed traumatic social dislocation, increasing individual and social crisis, decreasing quality of services and worsening working conditions (e.g., IFSW Europe 2014; Ioakimidis and Teloni, 2013; Truell, 2014b). Youth unemployment rates have reached record levels, outward migration has risen, public sector employment has contracted and salaries have been reduced. Social and political conflict has increased, including the rise of fascist and racist groups (Fazzi, 2013) and increased incidence of discrimination against minority groups such as Roma (Zaviršek, 2010).

Suicide rates have significantly increased as joblessness and homelessness intensify. The hidden but all too real consequences of this strategy are, for example, the suicide of a father who cannot cope with not being able to provide income to his family. The costs and emotional and inter-generational consequences far outweigh any benefits of closing down jobs to achieve national savings targets. Whilst migration can result in some economic benefits, such as reverse cash flows, the driving away of young people to other countries where they can find work leaves the austerity affected countries with an increasing proportion of older persons and younger children and a population gap, making it more difficult to rebuild economies for the future (Truell, 2012b).

To address the breakdown in their communities and society, on-the-ground practitioners in the most seriously affected southern European countries have supported the mobilisation of community populations to voice their solutions at local and regional levels (e.g., Consejo, 2013). They have facilitated community care in the absence of affordable state based social health care. They brought their case to the European Union, demonstrating the human costs that underlie the massively negative statistics of austerity (IFSW, 2013).

The Agenda submissions show how social workers have been able to develop and improve services, even in these difficult times (see regional chapter for details). Service user groups are involved with practitioners and educators to ensure users are involved at all levels to shape the education and training of new professionals. Practitioners and researchers have worked in different ways with those receiving state financial benefits to help them claim their rights and to identify where administration prevents policies from working effectively or causes problems for recipients. Cross-national studies explore the consequences of increasing global mobility, especially as they affect families and children. The social exclusion of older people and people with disabilities has been addressed in innovative ways, including the involvement of local communities and political structures. Work with prisoners and staff has expanded economic opportunities for young offenders following release from prison.

Social work and social development practitioners are also involved in advocacy or action to confront inequalities. The consequences of health inequalities have been identified from research and an international website has been launched with suggestions for improved practice. A mechanism for sharing policies focussed on LGBT populations has been established. A group of students organised a conference with local people on the realities of poverty which raised their own community consciousness. Projects aiming to develop competencies for citizen empowerment and to stimulate young people to understand their situation and to raise their voices were launched and a social interventions database has been created to share experience and outcomes.

This collation of examples of social work from across Europe is set within the very difficult social and economic conditions resulting from the financial, political and Eurozone crises. The projects illustrate the creative use of social work skills and knowledge to create change at personal, local, national and international levels.

Latin America and the Caribbean

Social work and social development in Latin America and the Caribbean have also been affected by the global financial climate. The status of social work varies across the region, with well-established and powerful professional voices in Brazil and some other countries and smaller professional groups in others (Baker, 2013; Julia, 2013; Parada et al., 2012; Queiro-Tajalli, 2013). There are also wide social and economic differences between countries. Whilst Brazil is one of the few countries in the world which can point to reducing economic inequality, other countries have seen a widening gap and even Brazil has witnessed growing social discontent (Chossudovsky, 2010; Mesquita, 2013).

Several conferences and workshops have been held in the region to review the impact of inequalities and discussions are continuing to generate a working alliance between IFSW (LAC) and the Latin American Association for Research and Training in Social Work (ALAIETS). A new joint body, the Latin American and Caribbean Committee of Organisations in Social Work and Social Service (COLACATS) was launched in May 2013 to strengthen regional cooperation. The III Encuentro⁶ – *State and Social Policy. Challenges and Opportunities for Latin American and Caribbean social work* – was held in Montevideo in May 2013 and focused on vocational training, conditions of professional work and ethics and human rights. The Association of Caribbean Social Work Educators (ACSWE) conference⁷ in Curaçao in July 2013 continued the theme, and when examining the implications of the *Global Agenda* for the region, noted the range of natural disasters that affected the region and the differential impact on survivors from differing socio-economic backgrounds. The poorest people always experience the greatest risks. There was discussion about the development of locality specific, culturally relevant approaches to problems. Practitioners and academics on many of the small islands are working together to innovate and produce good

examples of micro-practice that produce goods and services for those in need. Community development and uplift were major themes in the projects open for participant visits.

Increasing violence in the societies of the region is causing professional concern, linked with increasingly repressive policies which, in effect, criminalize poverty and increase pressures on vulnerable populations. These trends are also increasing personal risks for social workers based in those areas, including risks of personal violence.

A study has been launched into the deteriorating working conditions of social workers in the region, with growing insecurity of employment and changing roles, even though numbers employed are increasing (IFSW, 2014). Professional bodies believe that the Latin American social work model (e.g. Netto, 2012), which has evolved over decades, is under attack from neoliberal policies (Tavares, 2013). Despite the challenges, social workers retain a privileged position to observe and comment on changing and unequal social realities and aim to use these experiences to help develop more effective policies.

There is also evidence of pressure on educational institutions to depart from the well-established historical-philosophical social work tradition in the region, moving towards a more 'consumer' driven model, dominated by the needs of government policies and employers. Social workers are concerned that there is a trend to expect training to prepare social workers to focus on the problems of individuals rather than the reality of the social context (Netto, 2012).

This context of worsening social and economic conditions and increasing challenges for social workers highlights the important role of associations in putting the ethical and social dimensions of policies and economic development in the foreground. This implies a practice based on ethics and unwavering protection of human rights, but especially on critical reflection about professional work and the social contexts in which social relations are played out today. This is reflected in the regional debate about the definition of social work and the launch of an Observatory on Human Rights to promote the objectives of *The Global Agenda*.

North America

Social work in North America (Canada and USA) is well-established, with formal regulatory systems for qualifications and practice (Shera, 2013). The Caribbean islands are included in this region for IASSW but are in the IFSW Latin America and Caribbean region; the education for and practice of social work varies significantly between the different islands of the sub-region (Baker, 2013). This section focuses on Canada and the USA.

Both countries experienced the impact of the banking crisis and global recession and have a widening gap between the majority of the population and 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 (Truell, 2012a) environment. 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 1 in 5 children in the United States (Sell, 2010).

Discussions on *Global Agenda* themes took place within the existing framework 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), the US Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) conferences and the biennial conference of the Caribbean Association of Social Work Education (ACSWE). The process was promoted on the CSWE Kathleen Kendall Institute website.⁸

Activities which supported Agenda objectives were diverse. The Associations of Social Workers in Canada and the USA jointly promoted strategies on Agenda themes in the region. CASW and CASWE adopted a joint call for a national poverty reduction plan to ensure equitable access to programmes and services for all Canadians. Additional collaborative initiatives being undertaken by these two associations are likely to strengthen their capacity for action to implement the Agenda commitments, including a joint national conference in May 2014 where presentations are expected to focus on social and economic inequalities. CASWE and CASW have actively supported campaigns by indigenous peoples for recognition, resources and justice.

CSWE published an edited manual, *Teaching Human Rights: Curriculum Resources for Social Work Educators* (Hokenstad, 2013). CSWE requires schools to prepare students to promote advocacy in the areas of human rights and social and economic justice; the manual should support more consistent implementation. The human rights assessment scales, developed and submitted by McPherson and Abell (Florida State University), 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* (Limenez, 2014) covers several forms of discrimination including social and economic justice issues.

The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) commissioned two reports on social and economic rights. *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 programs. *The Canada Social Transfer and the Social Determinants of Health* (2013) examines policies and practices in relation to social service funding and delivery, and their impacts on social determinants of health. The authors conclude that 'economic and social inequalities are exacerbated by the inadequacy of (financial) benefits' (p. 2).

NASW USA supported several Agenda related activities, including a seminar on *The Feminization of Poverty: Revisited*, to highlight the impact that poverty and income inequality still have on women and girls. Campaigns were pursued on health care reform; immigration; maternal, infant and early childhood health and needy families. Marking the 50th Anniversary of the *War on Poverty*, NASW-USA partnered with the Council on Social Work Education and several other leading bodies to brief lawmakers on the strong correlation between poverty and child abuse and neglect. The theme for Social Work Month 2014 was 'All People Matter'. NASW-USA actively participated in the 50th Anniversary of the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. made his famous 'I Have a Dream' speech. Social workers played a key role in the 1963 March, including Dorothy Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr.

Asserting our voice

Thousands of people in each of the five regions, working through conferences, other professional exchanges and workplace discussions on the theme of 'Promoting Social and Economic Equality', have shown a common set of values and practices in action, that can help shape the hopes of peoples and facilitate better wellbeing. These values and practices are informed by the following insights derived from the experience of working at the interface of people and communities with social and developmental policy:

- *People cannot be developed by others.*

Our frontline experience has taught us that to escape from poverty and oppressive situations, people need to be actively involved in their own futures.

- *The cornerstone of a thriving economy is a stable, well-resourced and educated community*
All too often governments argue that they cannot afford to invest in community, whereas our frontline experience informs us that investing in community stimulates entrepreneurship, skill development, cultural innovations and business growth and widens opportunities for young people, men and women.
- *People are happier and wellbeing is better for all in more equitable societies.*
The massively unequal distribution of wealth causes more social instability, health and crime problems, negatively affecting everybody (Wilkinson, 2009).
- *When people have a collective voice, they are more able to advocate for their rights and participate in decision-making processes resulting in better wellbeing.*

Social work and social development practitioners are involved with individuals, families and groups who need supportive, stable and equitable communities and societies. For this to be realised, they need to be built on a socially just economic foundation. What would this fair and just global economy look like? Just like today, regulation would be based on multilateral treaties. Unlike today, national interests would be subordinated to acknowledgement of global interdependencies between nation-states and recognition of the need to rectify the earth's unequal distribution of finite resources (Dominelli, 2012). A just economy would be founded on human rights, fair pricing, international standards of labour, corporate social responsibilities, capacity building for low-income countries, and agreed forms of dialogue underpinning supply-and-demand agreements, enabling all parties to participate and share in benefits (Truell, 2013a). Collective international action could achieve sustainable economic, social and environmental wellbeing to meet the needs of today and future generations (George, 2003; Dominelli, 2012).

As social workers, educators and social development practitioners, we have a responsibility to draw attention to the realities of hardship and poverty, which are so often hidden, and to their causes. We must challenge the stereotypes that blame individuals for allowing themselves to fall into trouble or for being inadequate or dishonest. We know the reality is different — and more complex. People do have individual responsibilities but can exercise them more successfully in a fair and just environment which supports them with opportunities and resources.

We are not alone in promoting social and economic equalities and the need for socially just international regulation. Many economists have made this case (e.g. Ortiz, 2014; Milanovic, 2011; 2012). There is a growing, deep sense of injustice and lack of fairness all around the world, seen not only in the Occupy movement but also in political and academic writing and the popular mood. In that context, it is inevitable that social workers find themselves alongside the global movements which are challenging inadequately regulated and anti-human financial systems and advocating for fair and just economic and social policies.

The professional task of social work and social development practitioners is infinitely more difficult in an environment of blatant injustice and against such vindictive narratives about the alleged personal failures of those who are disadvantaged. That is why we are compelled to promote social and economic equalities and why the process of *The Global Agenda* is so important for our professions.

Moving forward

This first global report is a significant achievement for social work, education and social development in the international domain. It demonstrates commitment and the political will to share

resources, to work together, to act at community, national, regional and worldwide levels and to ensure that people have a say in their own futures. The social dimensions and needs of people must be at the forefront of policy at all levels and those with power need to address the global drivers of poverty and oppression.

The hard work and joint efforts of the thousands of volunteers behind this report give us all encouragement and hope for the health of our professions and a future global society based on social justice. Such a process can act as a model for governments and international policy development organisations, as lack of political will is the major barrier to overcoming many of the causes of social injustice and inequality.

The *Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development* assists our professions jointly to support a set of common objectives and focus points. In the last two years, our focus on *Promoting Social and Economic Equalities* has resulted in many joint global actions including advocating in political structures, facilitating community resourcefulness, and supporting communities to have influence over their own futures. This theme will of course continue and remain an important aspect of our joint work. The theme of the next two years will also result in advocacy and action, coordinated through our newly established Regional Observatories.

The theme for 2014 – 2016 is *Promoting the dignity and worth of peoples*. This provides us with the opportunity to advocate for the person's dignity to be at the centre of societies' actions, including those aimed at eradicating socio-economic inequalities.

Our work blends together with the voices of many others and the common call for a more humane and environmentally focused global society. To join our actions and be a part of the 2nd Global Agenda report in 2016 visit www.globalsocialagenda.org.

Notes

1. <http://www.globalsocialagenda.org>
2. <http://www.simmons.edu/ssw/icsd2013>, <http://www.socialdevelopment.net>
3. <http://ifsw.org/news/voices-for-development-outcomes-from-african-region-conference>
4. sss¹ <http://www.ensactistanbul.org>
5. <http://www.eassw.org/global-social-work/6/examples-of-submissions-to-the-european-observatory.html>
6. <http://ifsw.org/news/4376>
7. <http://www.acswecuracao.com>
8. <http://www.cswe.org/CentersInitiatives/KAKI/50754/68955.aspx>

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