

# Community Engagement *for Social Justice*

**Ubuntu**  
I Am Because We Are

Concept note

Promoting peaceful and inclusive societies (SDG 16) is integral to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Communities, in their diverse forms, sizes and locations, play a crucial role in the social, economic and political transformations necessary to achieve peaceful, inclusive and healthy societies. Social work and social workers seek to empower individuals, families and communities. In particular, they assist vulnerable or discriminated groups and individuals to overcome their everyday challenges, accessing services and programmes they are entitled to, making their voices heard and holding politicians to account. They are not only implementers of social policy, but also agents and enablers of change in a world that has committed to finding alternatives to business as usual on a new pathway to sustainability for people and planet. Most importantly, they support vulnerable groups and contribute to the provision of essential services in times of crisis, as the current Covid-19 pandemic has shown.

Social workers are a key element for societies all around the world to enhance social justice—a complex concept, relating to questions of distribution and redistribution of privileges and resources and based on moral and political values and normative frameworks. The latter vary considerably across cultures and over time, but the pillars are equality of rights and of opportunities and equity of living conditions (DESA UN, 2006).

Communities are increasingly facing a series of challenges: fall-out from a global economy in disarray; a political system that is unable or unwilling to create inclusive institutions, effective regulations and transformative policies; and environmental disasters, fragile livelihoods, displacement and dispossession of land, and conflicts that tear communities apart. Power asymmetries between (and within) civil society, business actors and states loom large, with corporate power seeming to influence every sphere of human activity.

In this context, the Covid-19 pandemic is not an equalizer and has instead thrown into sharp relief the weaknesses of our global system: under-funded health systems, lack of social protection, lack of preparedness and deepening cracks in international cooperation and solidarity. Consequently the most vulnerable in our societies—informal labourers, migrants and refugees, care workers, sick and vulnerable people without access to

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health care, people living in informal settlements or without housing, children cut off from education and school meals, women confined to unsafe domestic conditions, small and micro-entrepreneurs, and laid-off employees—are struggling not just to stay safe, but to cover their most basic needs. At the same time we can see worldwide how communities are rising to these challenges, reclaiming their place to co-decide on shaping the environments they live in, and demanding the care and services they are entitled to. Social work commitment to active, complex and multifaceted community engagement is at the core of the World Social Work Day 2021.

Overcoming the current crisis requires innovative policies, participatory governance and broad-based discussions about how to build a sustainable, inclusive and equitable future system. Anchored within communities, social work professionals facilitate processes of deliberation and co-creation. They bridge between communities and policy makers, and between social and environmental concerns. In this way, social workers can both mediate and catalyze change, learning from grassroots mobilizations and transmitting these experiences and actions.

In this spirit, we will celebrate World Social Work Day on 17-18 March 2021 in Geneva with a series of speeches and workshops, as well as a roundtable on social work and Covid-19, with the following aims: Give glimpses of communities' struggles from various parts of the world; share innovative approaches to enhance social work methodologies; discuss lessons learnt in the context of the pandemic for the social work profession; and draw attention to the relevance and impacts of community action and social work support around the globe to strengthen social justice, democracy and sustainable practices in a post-crisis world.

## Global agenda for social work and social development

After a first common agreement in 2012, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Council of Social Welfare (ICSW) adopted in 2020 a Global Agenda 2030 for Social Work and Social Development. This initiative provides a common basis for joint action addressing the major challenges of our societies and identifying relevant social issues for our profession and beyond. The Global Agenda is a strong commitment to promote social and economic equality, the dignity and worth of people, and environmental and community sustainability.

**C**elebrated worldwide since 1983 at the United Nations in New York and since 2012 in Geneva, World Social Work Day aims to highlight the achievements of social work, to raise the visibility of social services for the future of societies, and to defend social justice and human rights. World Social Work Day at the UN was born from the initiative of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), which have special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC). The Day has been celebrated since 2012 in Geneva by IASSW and IFSW with the collaboration of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland –Social Work, Geneva (HETS GE), since 2017 with the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), and since 2018 with the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland–Social Work, Fribourg.

World Social Work Day has the following objectives:

Strengthen cooperation, partnership, existing contacts - or establish new ones - with United Nations organizations and international NGOs;

Spread knowledge about social work, its values, principles and methods (practical and theoretical) among UN organizations and allied international NGOs;

Highlight social work actions, policies and achievements in the pursuit of common goals;

Disseminate knowledge about UN activities, goals, programs and campaigns among social workers and social work organizations and schools.

## International definition of social work

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

*Definition of social work adopted in 2014 by IASSW and IFSW.*

