Welcome Letter

by Antonio López Peláez, ICSW Executive Director

Dear ICSW members, friends, and interested readers,

Welcome to the January 2026 issue of our newsletter.

A new year is always a new opportunity to face the future, a time of opportunity to pursue our goals, and it is also always a promise of hope and a source of uncertainty. The future is not written.

In these times of uncertainty and strangeness in many different areas, 2026 will be a key year in the future of large social work and social welfare organizations. In June 2026, we will meet at the 2026 Joint World Conference on Social Work and Social Development (SWSD 2026), taking place in Nairobi, Kenya, from June 26 to 29, 2026, with the theme "Harambee for Sustainable Shared Futures."

Organized by the ICSW, IFSW, and IASSW, this conference will allow us to address the challenges of social work and social services in the coming years; it will allow us to share best practices; and it will allow us to bring to the table what is hidden in plain sight: the key role that social welfare and social justice play in an inclusive, tolerant, and democratic society.

I encourage all ICSW members and friends to register, travel, and participate in this congress on a continent, Africa, that is key to the future of humanity, and where social work and social policies must play a key role in social inclusion.

In this first issue of our Newsletter, in January 2026, in addition to the President´s Corner, we have the opportunity to look back at the past and forward to the future. I would like to thank Professor Chaime Marcuello Servós, from the University of Zaragoza, Spain, for sending us an article on the 1928 international conference that gave rise to the ICSW, the IFSW, and the IASSW, the centenary of which we will celebrate in 2028.

I would also like to thank Dr. Cornelia C. Walther, Senior Fellow at Wharton/Harvard, for her magnificent article on the future that awaits us and the role of Artificial Intelligence: How can we integrate AI into our social policies and welfare systems? How can we address the inclusion of AI in our professional practice? Along with these two articles, we also publish a brief review of the report published in November 2025, entitled "Building Equitable Social Protection Systems for a Sustainable Development Goal Recovery: The Case for a Global 'Virtual Financing' Mechanism."

Finally, we also publish information on the Side Event Convened by the International Council on Social Welfare and the International Association of Schools of Social Work, as part of the activities carried out by the UN Commission for Social Development. In 2026, we are focusing on the key role played by the participation of all actors in the design and implementation of social services, empowering communities. Date: Wednesday, 4 February 2026. Time: 10:00–11:15 a.m. EST (New York time). Format: Online event

I hope that 2026 will be a wonderful year and that together we can build a more inclusive, fair, and supportive society.

Take care and stay healthy.

Antonio
ICSW Executive Director

President´s Corner

Establishing Social Welfare Priorities in a Beyond-GDP World: A Personal Reflection and the Role of ICSW

by Sergei Zelenev, ICSW President

Social welfare is a loaded and inherently complex concept. National contexts shape differing value judgments about what constitutes social progress, which needs are most urgent, and how limited resources should be distributed. As a result, establishing priorities in social welfare is never a purely technical exercise. It is a political, and forward-looking process—one that reflects how societies define progress, whose needs they recognize, and how they understand vulnerability and risk in a rapidly changing world.

In the twenty-first century, this task has become markedly more demanding. Traditional measures of success no longer capture the lived realities, aspirations, and insecurities that shape people's lives. For this reason, I see a direct and profound link between social welfare prioritization and the global shift toward broader measures of progress—most notably the Beyond GDP agenda. Within this evolving landscape, the International Council on Social Welfare has a timely role to play.

At the national level, prioritization in social welfare unfolds across several interrelated fronts. Governments must constantly balance social spending against competing demands such as defense, infrastructure, and economic investment. Even within the social sector, difficult choices must be made among education, health, housing, social protection, and care services. At the same time, policymakers must decide which population groups—children, older persons, persons with disabilities, or people living in poverty—should receive priority attention. As social workers and social development practitioners, we are often the ones who make visible the unmet needs hidden behind aggregate statistics. As social development practitioners we insist that social investment is not a cost, but a prerequisite for cohesive and resilient societies.

What makes prioritization particularly challenging today is the speed with which social risks are evolving. Complexity is also a factor. Digitalization, demographic ageing, climate change, and widening inequalities are reshaping vulnerabilities in ways that conventional planning tools struggle to anticipate. Many countries face a double burden: addressing persistent deficits in basic services while simultaneously preparing for future risks associated with technological disruption or environmental stress. In such contexts, prioritization must be forward-looking, capable of anticipating emerging needs rather than merely responding to past crises. It must be flexible.

Traditionally, these decisions have been guided—explicitly or implicitly—by economic indicators, most notably Gross Domestic Product. GDP remains the most widely used benchmark of national progress, measuring the monetary value of goods and services produced within an economy. Yet GDP tells us little about whether people are healthy, secure, educated, or able to participate meaningfully in society. It does not account for unpaid care work, social cohesion, environmental degradation, or the distribution of opportunities within a population. I have long believed that reliance on GDP alone produces a distorted hierarchy of priorities—one that undervalues prevention, care, and social inclusion, while privileging short-term economic gains.

Efforts to move beyond GDP are not new. For decades, scholars, policymakers, and international organizations have sought to develop alternative frameworks that better reflect human well-being and sustainability. These efforts have gradually created a shared language and community of practice. They include the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals, which integrate economic, social, and environmental dimensions; the UNDP's Human Development Index, which supplements income with measures of health, education, inequality, and multidimensional poverty; gender-responsive indicators that capture unpaid care work and the social and economic costs of violence against women; and initiatives by the OECD, the World Bank, the IMF, and UNEP focusing on inclusive growth, and comprehensive wealth.

Among these initiatives, the Sustainable Development Goals stand out as the most comprehensive and universally agreed Beyond GDP framework currently in use. Their indicators were consciously designed to

address the shortcomings of GDP, and target 17.19 explicitly calls on Member States to develop measures of progress on sustainable development that complement GDP and strengthen statistical capacity, particularly in developing countries.

As the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres observed in Our Common Agenda, now is the time to correct a glaring blind spot in how we measure prosperity and progress. When profits come at the expense of people and the planet, we are left with an incomplete—and misleading—picture of development. This recognition led the UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination in 2021 to deliberate formally on measuring progress beyond GDP, underscoring that the issue is not merely technical or statistical, but deeply consequential for people and planet.

The subsequent work of the High-Level Committee on Programmes, including the establishment of an Expert Group on Beyond GDP, marked an important institutional step. For the first time, the international community has collectively acknowledged—most recently under the Pact for the Future—that GDP must be complemented by a broader set of metrics reflecting the realities and aspirations of the twenty-first century. Bringing the Beyond GDP agenda firmly into the United Nations system elevates the debate from fragmented national experiments to a universal framework grounded in shared values and human rights. In my view, this shift offers a new and much-needed compass for social welfare prioritization.

The emerging Beyond GDP framework resonates strongly with concerns long voiced by social welfare actors. Its emphasis on well-being, equity and inclusion, and sustainability aligns closely with the core objectives of social policy. Well-being encompasses not only material conditions, but also health, education, social connections, and subjective life satisfaction. Equity and inclusion focus attention on the distribution of resources and opportunities, ensuring that progress is shared and that no one is left behind. Sustainability introduces an intergenerational perspective, reminding us that today's policy choices are most important for the future.

For social welfare, these pillars provide a far more meaningful basis for setting priorities. If success is measured by improvements in well-being rather than aggregate income, preventive services, mental health, and community-based care gain visibility and legitimacy. If equity becomes central, targeted interventions for disadvantaged groups are no longer peripheral, but essential to overall social progress. If sustainability is taken seriously, investments in early childhood, education, and social cohesion become strategic imperatives rather than optional expenditures.

The Beyond GDP agenda also reinforces an insight that social development practitioners have long understood intuitively: economic, social, and environmental systems are deeply interdependent. Societies that are healthier, more inclusive, and environmentally stable are better equipped to innovate and adapt. Conversely, neglecting social welfare undermines economic prospects and fuels social fragmentation. Establishing priorities in social welfare, therefore, is not a zero-sum trade-off between "social" and "economic" goals, but a foundation for long-term prosperity.

This is precisely where I see ICSW's role as distinctive. As a global NGO rooted in practice, policy, and advocacy, ICSW is uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between high-level frameworks such as Beyond GDP and the lived realities of communities. First, ICSW can help translate new metrics into the language of social policy, supporting governments and practitioners in using well-being, equity, and sustainability indicators to inform concrete decisions on social spending and service delivery.

Second, ICSW can amplify the voices of service users within the Beyond GDP debate. Metrics are never neutral; they reflect choices about what counts and what is valued. By bringing evidence from the field—on poverty, exclusion, care deficits, and emerging risks—ICSW can help ensure that new measurement frameworks remain grounded in human experience rather than abstract modeling.

Third, ICSW can contribute to capacity-building and mutual learning across countries. While prioritization challenges differ widely between national contexts, all countries face common dilemmas related to inequality, ageing, and social cohesion. Through comparative analysis, policy dialogue, and knowledge exchange, ICSW can support governments in using Beyond GDP metrics to design context-sensitive and forward-looking social welfare strategies.

For me, establishing priorities in social welfare ultimately comes down to a fundamental question: what kind of society do we want to build? The move beyond GDP offers a rare opportunity to align our measurements with our values—placing dignity, well-being, and sustainability at the center of policy choices. For ICSW, this is not simply a new framework to observe from the sidelines. It is a call to action, and one that aligns closely with who we are and what we stand for.

U.N General Assembly Recognises the Care Economy as a Pillar of Sustainable Development

The recent adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of the resolution *"Contribution of the care economy to sustainable development"* marks a major advance in global social and economic policy. For the first time, the General Assembly explicitly positions the care economy as a strategic driver of sustainable development, poverty eradication and gender equality. The resolution strongly reflects priorities long advocated by the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), particularly the recognition of care as a public good and a cornerstone of inclusive and resilient societies.

Anchored in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the resolution reaffirms that eradicating poverty in all its forms remains the world's greatest challenge. It emphasizes that care work—paid and unpaid, formal and informal—is essential to human well-being, social cohesion, economic productivity and environmental sustainability. By acknowledging that care underpins all other forms of work, the resolution challenges economic models that have systematically undervalued care, especially unpaid care and domestic work disproportionately carried out by women and girls.

A central contribution of the resolution is its clear call for transformative policy measures. It recommends adopting concrete actions to recognize both unpaid and paid care work and to reduce, redistribute and properly value unpaid care responsibilities. This includes promoting the equal sharing of care duties between women and men within households, prioritizing sustainable physical and social infrastructure, expanding social protection policies, and ensuring access to affordable, high-quality care and support services across the life course. The resolution further highlights the importance of adequate paid maternity, paternity and parental leave, as well as strong protection against discrimination on the grounds of maternity in the labour market—measures that are critical to enabling women's full and equal participation in economic and social life.

The resolution makes a compelling economic case for investing in care. It notes that unpaid care and domestic work, if valued at minimum wage, could account for between 10 and 39 per cent of GDP, often surpassing traditional productive sectors. More importantly, it underscores that well-designed investments in the care economy yield substantial macroeconomic and social returns. According to International Labour Organization estimates cited in the resolution, such measures could generate nearly 300 million jobs globally by 2035, raise global employment rates by more than six percentage points, and reduce the gender employment gap by around seven percentage points. In particular, every United States dollar invested in closing childcare gaps could yield an average increase of 3.76 dollars in gross domestic product by 2035. These findings powerfully reposition care spending as an investment with high economic multipliers rather than a fiscal burden.

The resolution also addresses structural inequalities. It highlights how women's overrepresentation in unpaid care and in low-paid, insecure care jobs contributes to the feminization of poverty and limits lifetime earnings, pensions and social security coverage. Comprehensive care and support systems—encompassing legal frameworks, services, financing, infrastructure, training and governance—are identified as essential to reducing women's economic vulnerability and preventing the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

For ICSW, the longer-term significance of this resolution is substantial. It provides a strong global mandate to integrate care into economic and social policymaking, national statistics and development planning, while reinforcing the links between care, decent work, social protection and human rights. As the international community is focused on accelerating implementation of the 2030 Agenda, this resolution offers a transformative vision: development rooted in care, shared responsibility, social justice and human dignity—core values at the heart of social welfare worldwide.

When AI Decides Who Gets Help: Why Social Welfare needs a ProSocial Reset

by Cornelia C. Walther

Artificial intelligence is quietly becoming part of how societies decide who gets help, when, and under what conditions. From benefits eligibility to housing support, from disability assessments to unemployment services, algorithms are increasingly embedded in systems that touch the most vulnerable moments of people's lives.

This is not a future scenario. It is already happening.

And that makes one question unavoidable: What kind of intelligence do we want guiding our social safety nets?

AI can reduce paperwork, speed up decisions, and help governments manage complex systems under pressure. But it can also do something far more consequential: it can reshape how dignity, fairness, and participation are experienced in everyday life. Used carelessly, it risks turning social support into automated surveillance. Used wisely, it could become one of the most powerful tools for social inclusion we have ever designed.

That difference does not lie in the technology itself. It lies in the intent we build into it.

AI Is a Means, Not a Moral Compass

Every major technological revolution has promised progress. And every one has also produced new inequalities.

The industrial age created gigantic wealth – while locking in harsh labor conditions. The digital age connected the world – while turning attention, behavior, and personal data into commodities. Each time, social policy arrived late, scrambling to repair damage that could have been prevented.

AI marks a more delicate threshold. Unlike previous technologies, it does not just amplify physical labor or information flow. It increasingly mediates human judgment itself – how decisions are made, how people are categorized, how risk and deservingness are defined.

That is why AI cannot be guided by efficiency alone. Speed and accuracy are not enough when the outcome affects someone's ability to eat, access healthcare, or remain housed.

What must guide AI, instead, is Natural Intelligence: our human capacity to reason ethically, feel empathy, understand context, and take responsibility for consequences. AI can support those capacities – but it cannot replace them.

This is where the idea of ProSocial AI comes in.

From "Ethical AI" to ProSocial AI

Much of today's conversation focuses on *ethical AI*: reducing bias, protecting privacy, improving transparency. These safeguards matter. But they are defensive. They aim to prevent harm, not to define what systems should actively enable.

A system can be technically ethical and still deeply misaligned with human needs.

Another popular frame, *AI for Good*, applies existing tools to positive causes – healthcare, climate, education. Again, valuable. But the "good" often lives in the use case, not in the architecture. The same system can easily be redeployed for extractive or exclusionary ends.

ProSocial AI goes further.

It starts from a different question: *What kind of society are we trying to support?* And then builds systems that are deliberately designed to reinforce human dignity, agency, and participation – by default, not as an afterthought.

In practical terms, ProSocial AI means AI systems that are:

- **Tailored** to real social contexts, rather than imposed as one-size-fits-all solutions
- **Trained** on data that counteracts exclusion instead of amplifying it
- **Tested** for their impact on dignity, trust, and lived experience – not just performance metrics
- **Targeted** at democratically defined goals, such as maximizing access to support rather than minimizing payouts

In social welfare, that shift is important.

Why Welfare Systems Are the Real Test Case

Social welfare is where values become operational.

When a benefits application is rejected, when support is delayed, when an appeal is ignored, the consequences are not abstract. They show up as stress, instability, shame, and loss of trust in institutions.

Yet many welfare systems today use technology primarily to create friction – to deter claims, detect fraud, and manage scarcity. Automation often shifts the burden of proof onto individuals least able to navigate complex digital systems.

The result has been well documented: wrongful benefit terminations, opaque decisions, and entire groups excluded because their data does not "fit" the model.

These failures are not inevitable. They are design choices.

ProSocial AI proposes a different logic: use intelligence to remove friction, not add it.

Use systems to identify who is missing out, not who to exclude.

Design processes that assume eligibility and help people claim their rights, rather than forcing them to prove worthiness repeatedly.

To do this well, we need to look beyond single systems and consider how AI operates across different layers of society.

A Four-Level View of Impact
AI in welfare does not affect only individuals. Its effects ripple across institutions, national policy, and even global power dynamics. A ProSocial approach therefore looks at four interconnected levels:

1. Individuals (micro level)
This is where AI is felt most directly. For many people, automated systems already feel impersonal, intimidating, and uncontestable.

A ProSocial approach asks: *Does this system strengthen or weaken a person's sense of agency?*

That requires more than digital access. It requires what can be called double literacy:
- understanding oneself – one's needs, limits, emotions, and values
- understanding how algorithms work, where they fail, and how to challenge them

At this level, good systems should foster:
- awareness of how decisions are made
- appreciation for human vulnerability rather than exploitation of it
- acceptance that AI is a tool, not an authority
- accountability on both sides – clear responsibility and meaningful recourse

If interacting with a system leaves people feeling smaller, confused, or powerless, the system has failed – no matter how "efficient" it is.

2. Organizations and communities (meso level)
Social workers, case managers, and frontline staff often experience AI as something imposed from above. Rigid systems can strip away professional judgment and turn care into compliance.

ProSocial AI supports Hybrid Intelligence: machines handle routine tasks, while humans focus on relationships, context, and moral judgment.

Instead of replacing professionals, AI should function like an administrative exoskeleton – reducing paperwork, summarizing information, translating bureaucratic language – so people can do the work only humans can do.

Crucially, this requires co-design. Systems must be built *with* those who use them and those affected by them, not merely *for* them.

3. National policy (macro level)
At the level of governments, AI can either entrench surveillance or enable smarter, fairer welfare states.

Used well, AI can:

● detect non-take-up of benefits and proactively reach out
● anticipate social stress (job loss, inflation, housing pressure) and adjust support early
● move systems from reactive crisis management to preventive stabilization

Used poorly, it normalizes suspicion and erodes trust.

A ProSocial welfare state evaluates success not just by cost savings, but by a **quadruple bottom line:**
● purpose: are systems aligned with shared social goals?
● people: do they improve wellbeing and cohesion?
● prosperity: are they financially sustainable?
● planet: do they respect environmental limits?

4. Global systems (meta level)
AI capabilities are highly concentrated. Most models are built in, and for, a small number of countries and corporations.

Without intentional correction, this risks exporting biased systems worldwide – what some have called digital or data colonialism.

A ProSocial approach demands:

● investment in local capacity and data sovereignty
● smaller, more energy-efficient models where appropriate
● global standards that protect dignity without imposing cultural uniformity

Welfare AI should not save one society today by undermining planetary stability or global equity tomorrow.

The Limits We Must Acknowledge

ProSocial AI is not a magic solution.

Technology cannot fix poverty, inequality, or injustice on its own. Without political will, institutional reform, and civic participation, even well-designed systems can become empty gestures.

There is also the risk of commercial capture: public institutions becoming dependent on opaque private platforms. Building ProSocial AI requires public investment, open standards, and procurement rules that reward transparency and participation.

Finally, "prosocial" is not a single universal definition. What counts as dignity or fairness must be shaped locally, through democratic processes, within shared human rights boundaries.

Acknowledging these limits is not a weakness. It is what keeps ProSocial AI grounded.

A Choice, Not a Fate

AI has begun to reshape societies, and social welfare

Whether this dynamic will deepen exclusion or expand participation; whether it will automate distrust or rebuild the social contract, is up to us.

The decisive factor is not technical sophistication. It is human leadership – the willingness to align systems with values before they harden into infrastructure.

ProSocial AI is not about making machines more human. It is about making our institutions more humane.

Practical Takeaways

For citizens

⬤ Ask not only *what* a system decides, but *how* and *why*
⬤ Expect explanations and challenge opaque decisions
⬤ Build basic algorithmic literacy alongside self-awareness

For professionals

⬤ Treat AI as support, not authority
⬤ Insist on systems that preserve judgment and relational work
⬤ Document when technology undermines dignity or trust

For policymakers

⬤ Measure success by access, dignity, and stability – not just savings
⬤ Use AI to detect exclusion and non-take-up, not only fraud
⬤ Require co-design, transparency, and clear accountability

For technologists

⬤ Design for vulnerability, not ideal users
⬤ Test emotional and social impact, not just accuracy
⬤ Build systems that slow down high-stakes decisions when needed

For society at large

⬤ Remember: AI reflects the priorities we encode
⬤ If we want welfare systems that support participation and dignity, we must design them that way – on purpose

Everything is connected. Artificial and natural intelligence increasingly influence each other. As we are transitioning to a hybrid era we must ensure that AI remains a means to an end, and leave the latter to be decided by NI.

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Roots and Wings, Near a Century
The Paris Conference of 1928: A Founding Milestone

by Chaime Marcuello-Servós

Abstract: July 2028 will mark a century since the *Première Conférence Internationale du Service Social* was held in Paris, giving rise to the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW), International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), and International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW). This anniversary serves as an opportunity to reflect on where we have come from and ask where we want to go. This brief essay offers some thoughts on these two dimensions.

Two metaphors

To grow, a tree needs to sink its roots into the ground. This image serves as a reminder that any impulse toward the future requires knowledge of our origins and the path we have travelled. Our roots connect us to accumulated knowledge, to the experiences that preceded us, to the mistakes and successes that shaped the present in which we find ourselves. Anticipating the future without recognizing one´s own roots is like trying to build a building without foundations: the structure may rise momentarily, but it lacks the stability necessary to withstand the passage of time. And we say this not as chains that bind us to the past, but as essential nutrients that feed our ability to project ourselves forward with coherence and purpose.
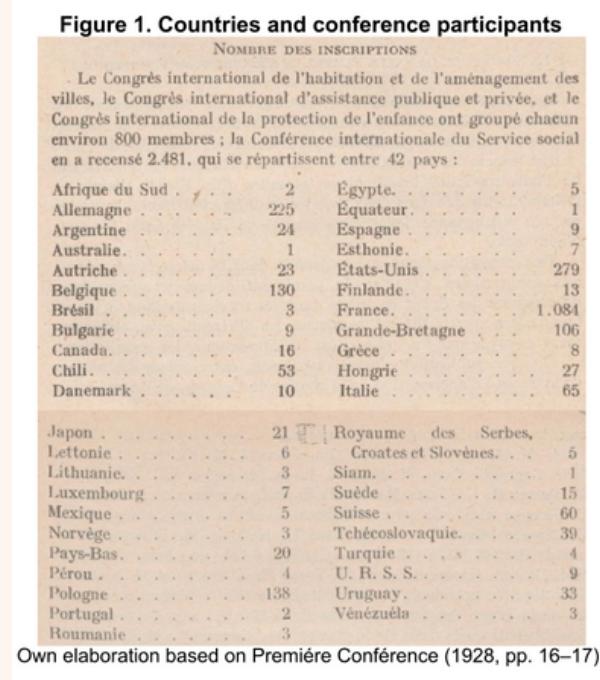
However, roots alone are not enough if we aspire to solve the challenges of the present and reach new horizons. We also need wings, wings to fly. This is another metaphor that shows the ability to imagine what does not yet exist, to dare to take off from familiar ground and explore the unknown. Flying means leaving the ground behind; it requires courage to abandon the security of the familiar, but it is precisely in that flight that the possibility of transformation lies. It is a challenge to maintain the balance between both forces: to be sufficiently rooted so as not to lose our bearings, but sufficiently winged so as not to remain immobile. Anticipating the future in this way honours the past while launching, with determination and imagination, toward what is yet to be written. This also applies to international organizations such as the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) founded in 1928 (Zelenev, 2018).

International perspective

Just like human beings, human organizations also have to think about their past in order to plan for the future. Understanding past successes and failures, recognizing the contexts that shaped original missions, provides the stability needed to navigate an increasingly complex global landscape. Without these roots, organizations risk losing their identity and credibility in the face of shifting political winds. As it is said before, roots alone cannot propel international organizations toward the future. Again, they need wings: the capacity to adapt, innovate, and reimagine their roles in response to emerging challenges like climate change, digital governance, pandemics and more. True institutional wisdom lies in balancing both forces —remaining anchored in core values while being agile enough to evolve. The most effective international organizations honour their origins while courageously flying toward new solutions, maintaining the delicate equilibrium between continuity and transformation.

The Paris Conference of 1928 was a founding milestone in International Social Work and Social Welfare. Nearly a century after the historic Paris gathering of July 1928, it is crucial to rescue from oblivion an event that marked a turning point in the history of social work worldwide. The First International Conference of Social Service, held between July 8-13, 1928, was not merely another academic event but the foundational moment of a new global consciousness about the need to address social challenges from an international and cooperative perspective.

The magnitude of this gathering remains impressive even by today´s standards: 2,481 participants from 42 countries convened in the French capital, (see Figure 1). This massive turnout demonstrated the profound interest in thinking, professionalizing and systematizing social work, as well as the growing recognition that social problems knew no national borders and required coordinated international responses.

Figure 1. Countries and conference participants

NOMBRE DES INSCRIPTIONS

Le Congrès international de l'habitation et de l'aménagement des villes, le Congrès international d'assistance publique et privée, et le Congrès international de la protection de l'enfance ont groupé chacun environ 800 membres ; la Conférence internationale du Service social en a recensé 2.481, qui se répartissent entre 42 pays :

Afrique du Sud	2	Égypte	5
Allemagne	225	Équateur	1
Argentine	24	Espagne	9
Australie	1	Esthonie	7
Autriche	23	États-Unis	279
Belgique	130	Finlande	13
Brésil	3	France	1.084
Bulgarie	9	Grande-Bretagne	106
Canada	16	Grèce	8
Chili	53	Hongrie	27
Danemark	10	Italie	65
Japon	21	Royaume des Serbes, Croates et Slovènes	5
Lettonie	6		
Lithuanie	3	Siam	1
Luxembourg	7	Suède	15
Mexique	5	Suisse	60
Norvège	3	Tchécoslovaquie	39
Pays-Bas	20	Turquie	4
Pérou	4	U. R. S. S.	9
Pologne	138	Uruguay	33
Portugal	2	Vénézuéla	3
Roumanie	3		

Own elaboration based on Premiére Conférence (1928, pp. 16–17).

Significance of the Paris Conference

To understand Paris conference´s significance, we must situate it in its historical moment. Europe had emerged barely a decade earlier from the horror of World War I, which left deep scars on the continent´s social fabric. Millions dead, disintegrated families, devastated economies, displaced persons and war-wounded created a landscape urgently demanding new forms of social intervention. Social work, then a discipline in process of consolidation, presented itself as a promising tool to address these pressing needs.

The conference occurred at a paradoxical moment in World and Europe history. While there existed a profound yearning for social progress and reconstruction, and renewed faith in humanity´s capacity to organize and solve problems rationally and scientifically, this hope developed on fragile ground. Just one year after the conference, the 1929 economic crisis would plunge the world into the Great Depression. This temporal proximity between the optimism of 1928 and the collapse of 1929 gives the conference a prophetic character: its organizers and participants sensed, consciously or unconsciously, the need to strengthen social protection mechanisms before it was too late.

The organizing committee, established two years prior in 1926, itself constituted an experiment in international collaboration. As they said: *«The idea of convening an international conference on social work came quite naturally to the minds of European and Japanese social workers who were invited to participate in the National Conferences of Atlantic City (1919) and Washington (1923)»*, (Première Conférence,1928, vol.1, p.7).

The conference leadership revealed the social forces driving social work´s development. Dr. Alice Masarykova (1879-1966), president of the Czechoslovak Red Cross and daughter of Czechoslovakia´s first president, assumed the presidency. Dr. René Sand, technical advisor to the League of Red Cross Societies, served as secretary, while Dr. André Paillan, treasurer general of the same League, took on treasurer duties. This Red Cross preponderance was not coincidental: the organization had accumulated invaluable experience during and after the war, becoming a fundamental actor in articulating responses to humanitarian crises. All the details can be read at the three voluminous proceedings, totalling 2,465 pages, constitute a true panoramic photograph of social service in numerous countries during the interwar period.

Nearly a century later, the world faces unprecedented social challenges: mass migrations, growing inequalities, climate crisis, technological transformations, global pandemics, cruel wars and conflicts. Yet many concerns from 1928 persist: poverty, social exclusion, child protection, public health, decent housing, unemployment. The 1928 Paris conference reminds us that social work was born from an internationalist vocation, from the conviction that social problems demand responses transcending national borders. In an era of resurgent of old challenges, recovering this founding event´s memory can inspire us to reaffirm our commitment to international solidarity and truly global social welfare.

Last Metaphor: Tending the Garden
It is worth rescuing some ideas from Alice Masarykova´s inaugural speech. She used the metaphor of a gardener tending to a pear orchard with dedication and patience, qualities she compared to those of an ideal social worker to overcome dangerous dichotomies such as selfishness/altruism, aristocracy/democracy, charity/science, national/international, Eastern/Western, (Première Conférence, 1928, vol.1, p.161). From Masarykova´s perspective, these apparent oppositions were reconciled in a higher synthesis, emphasizing the importance of combining different virtues and approaches in social work. She then said: *«We must feel, if we want to be true to ourselves, that our work will manifest itself in hygiene and joy throughout the world. Let me quote a very ancient Eastern verse: "Remove from me, Lord, the spirit of vanity, of discouragement, / the inanity of words, the ambition of power. And give me the spirit/ of charity, wisdom and love. Show me my own sins/ so that I may not judge those of my neighbour" »,* (Première Conférence, 1928, vol.1, p.162).

Her perspective sought points of encounter and convergence. Her argument remains valid: *«We must be wisely selfish when we think of others´; well-being, and prudently altruistic when we think of ourselves and our family. Only the cultivated individual can contribute to creating the social conditions that will populate the next generation of citizens awakened to their social duties».*

Just as it remains necessary to apply her proposal when deploying social action: *«charity manifests itself in the capacity to give and receive, while scientific work is the correct search for truth. Charity embellishes scientific work, and science frees charity from weakness and sentimentalism. That is why charity united with scientific work represents the fullness of life»,* (Première Conférence, 1928, vol.1, p.162).

That approach remains relevant for seeking solutions to the challenges of our time. And it connects directly with the Social Protection Floor Initiative* . The Planet on which we live is our common home in which we travel as humanity through the Universe. It falls to us to learn from the past so as not to repeat mistakes and improve solutions. Roots to grow and wings to fly.

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*See more at: https://www.icsw.org/activities/social-protection-floor-initiative

Publications in Focus

Building Equitable Social Protection Systems for a Sustainable Development Goal Recovery: The Case for a Global 'Virtual Financing' Mechanism

by Sergei Zelenev

Published in November 2025, the report *Building Equitable Social Protection Systems for a Sustainable Development Goal Recovery: The Case for a Global 'Virtual Financing' Mechanism* addresses one of the most pressing challenges facing the international community: how to close the widening gap in social protection coverage and financing in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Funded by UK Aid through the Social Protection Technical Assistance, Advice and Resources (STAAR) Facility, the report was authored by a team of researchers and consultants from ODI Global. The STAAR Facility's mandate—to strengthen crisis-responsive and gender-responsive social protection through independent technical assistance and policy advice—frames the report's emphasis on equity, effectiveness, and international cooperation.

The report starts from a stark diagnosis. Current "business-as-usual" approaches to social protection are fundamentally insufficient to meet global needs. According to World Bank estimates cited in the report, around 1.6 billion people worldwide lack any access to social protection, while a further 400 million receive benefits that are too small to provide meaningful protection against shocks. At existing rates of expansion, it could take up to two decades to reach even the poorest 20 per cent of populations in low- and middle-income countries. This trajectory is especially alarming for fragile and conflict-affected (FCV) states, where overlapping vulnerabilities—conflict, climate shocks, food insecurity, and weak institutions—leave large segments of the population exposed to extreme deprivation. Without accelerated and targeted action during the 2020s, the report argues, the promise of universal social protection embodied in the SDGs will remain out of reach.

A central theme of the report is the scale of the social protection financing gap. While domestic resource mobilisation must play a central role, many low-income and FCV countries lack the fiscal space to expand coverage at the pace required. International cooperation, affordable development finance, and predictable external support are therefore indispensable. Against this backdrop, the report reviews long-standing proposals for the creation of a new global fund for social protection, modelled in part on multilateral global health funds. Proponents argue that such a fund could mobilise and pool resources, set clear global targets, support national ownership, and accelerate progress through coordinated investment strategies.

The report recognises the strengths of this model and draws important lessons from global health financing mechanisms, including the value of clearly defined targets, cost-sharing rules between governments and donors, sustained monitoring of results, and a strong equity focus. However, it also presents a sober assessment of political and institutional realities. International appetite for establishing a new global fund for social protection is currently limited. Multilateral cooperation is under strain, aid budgets are declining, and negotiating a new institution with a distinct legal identity would almost certainly be time-consuming. Given the urgency of delivering results by 2030, the report concludes that alternative approaches are needed.

It is in this context that the report advances the concept of a global "virtual financing" mechanism for social protection. Drawing inspiration from innovations in climate finance, virtual financing seeks to replicate many of the benefits of global funds—coordination, predictability, alignment behind national plans, and a focus on results—without creating new institutional or legal entities. Instead, it relies on structured platforms that bring together donors, development banks, governments, and other stakeholders around nationally owned strategies.

The report highlights several relevant precedents. In the climate sphere, Just Energy Transition Partnerships and country-level investment platforms in Brazil, Egypt, and Bangladesh demonstrate how coordinated financing can support nationally defined priorities. In the social protection sector, Togo's Novissi programme during the COVID-19 pandemic is cited as a powerful example. Novissi rapidly mobilised support from multilateral development banks, philanthropies, and the private sector to deliver digital cash transfers, illustrating how coordination and innovation can deliver results even in crisis conditions.

Building on these experiences, the report proposes the establishment of a global coordination vehicle for social protection virtual financing. While such a function could theoretically be housed in institutions like the World Bank or the International Labour Organization (ILO), the report makes a strong case for working through the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty, established during Brazil's presidency of the G20. The Alliance was created to accelerate progress towards SDGs 1 and 2—ending poverty and hunger—and has already developed a track record of engagement with national governments, donors, financial institutions, and technical agencies. Many of the nationally owned plans supported by the Alliance centre on cash transfers and social protection, making it a natural institutional anchor for a virtual financing mechanism.

The governance structure of the Global Alliance is seen as a particular strength, offering a strong voice for the Global South and a platform for coordinating support around shared outcomes. However, the report also acknowledges that reforms would be required. At present, the Alliance links national plans to donor support largely on an ad hoc basis. A more systematic approach—where donors commit financing to plans developed and verified through the Alliance—could create stronger incentives for governments to invest in social protection and accelerate progress towards agreed global targets. While financing would continue to flow through existing bilateral and multilateral channels, the Alliance would play a coordinating and accountability-enhancing role.

Empirical insights from key informant interviews conducted across 11 countries reinforce the report's analysis. These interviews highlight the importance of strong national systems, including digital infrastructure, as enabling conditions for effective coordination. Multi-donor trust funds are widely viewed as having a comparative advantage in managing coordination challenges, while persistent differences between humanitarian and development financing—particularly in fiduciary risk management and reporting—continue to limit coherence. Informants also point to significant untapped potential for integrating humanitarian, development, and climate finance through social protection systems.

The report concludes with a set of concrete recommendations. These include establishing a virtual financing mechanism for social protection under the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty, backed by financing commitments linked to global outcome targets; defining clear equity targets to prioritise countries and communities that have been left behind; closing the humanitarian development divide through joint planning and greater use of national systems; integrating climate and humanitarian finance into social protection planning in line with the Belém Declaration; and adopting best practices from successful national coordination systems.

Overall, the report offers a pragmatic and timely contribution to global debates on social protection financing. By shifting the focus from the creation of new institutions to smarter coordination within the existing architecture, it provides a credible pathway for accelerating progress towards universal, equitable, and resilient social protection systems in the critical decade ahead.

Watkins, K., Nwajiaku-Dahou, K., Long, C., Manuel, M., Sissa, A. Stronge, C. & Knox, D. (2025) 'Building equitable global social protection systems for a Sustainable Development Goal recovery – the case for a 'virtual financing' mechanism', Social Protection Technical Assistance, Advice and Resources (STAAR) Facility, DAI Global UK Ltd, United Kingdom.
Source: https://media.odi.org/documents/B248_Formatted_Report.pdf

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64th Session of the Commission for Social Development Side Event Convened by the International Council on Social Welfare and the International Association of Schools of Social Work

Date: Wednesday, 4 February 2026
Time: 10:00–11:15 a.m. EST (New York time)
Format: Online event
Title:
**Empowering Communities: Strengthening Local Participation for Responsive Social Services**
This online side event will explore how governments and civil society actors are developing innovative approaches to make social services more responsive, inclusive, and grounded in community realities. Organized as a panel discussion, the seminar will examine how participatory approaches can be institutionalized so that social services better reflect the real needs, priorities, and lived experiences of individuals and communities.

Further details, including registration information and the list of speakers, will be made available on the ICSW website in due course.

SWSD 2026 conference in Kenya
26-29 June, 2026

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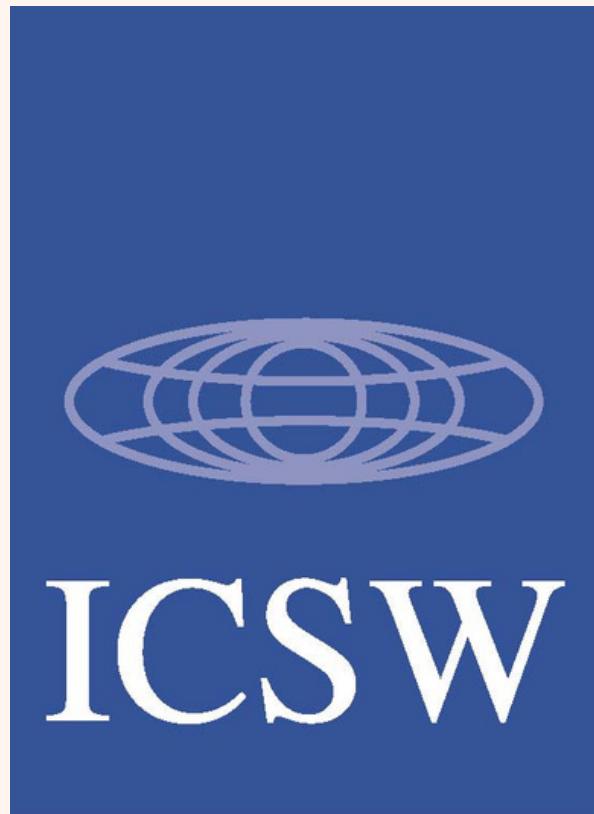
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