

ICSW GLOBAL SITUATION REPORT 2026

*Navigating Contemporary Dilemmas in
Social Policy and Social Development*



June 2026



ICSW

INTERNATIONAL
COUNCIL ON
SOCIAL WELFARE (ICSW)

**Navigating Contemporary
Dilemmas in Social Policy and Social Development:
ICSW Global Situation Report 2026**

**Prepared by
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Based on the regional submissions and other relevant sources

**June 2026
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Preface

The International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) is one of the oldest civil society organisations working in the field of human well-being, social work, and social policy. In two years, ICSW will mark its centennial anniversary in Paris, where the organisation held its first conference in 1928. Over these decades, much has changed in the world. Yet throughout its history, ICSW has contributed to shaping new concepts, new narratives, and even new language in the field of social welfare.

We are living through a remarkable historical moment, witnessing profound tectonic shifts in global affairs. Yet even within the more specific field of social welfare and social development, it is no exaggeration to say that we are entering a new era shaped by artificial intelligence (AI) and rapid technological transformation. AI is changing the way institutions function, the way services are delivered, the way people communicate, learn, and even make decisions. Naturally, these transformations bring both hope and concern. They open new opportunities for efficiency, participation, and inclusion, while also raising serious ethical and social questions about inequality, exclusion, employment, privacy, and human dignity.

Remaining relevant in such rapidly changing conditions is, of course, a challenge for any organisation. But ICSW is making a serious effort to engage with these emerging realities.

This situation Report is a collective endeavour. By and large, it is based on analytical inputs prepared by the ICSW regional members in response to the questionnaire circulated by the global office. The evidence presented in the regional submissions is very rich and extremely important. It is hoped that the Report will allow participants in the Joint World Conference in Nairobi not only to exchange ideas but also to reflect collectively on the human dimensions of current social challenges, with their hopes, anxieties, and aspirations.

Sergei Zelenev, President of ICSW

Acknowledgement

The *ICSW Global Situation Report 2026* is the product of a broad-based collaborative effort that reflects the ICSW's longstanding commitment to promoting social justice, inclusive social development, and international cooperation. The preparation of this report has benefited from the knowledge, experience, and dedication of numerous individuals and institutions across the global ICSW network.

The ICSW expresses its sincere appreciation to all nine ICSW Regional Committees for preparing comprehensive regional situation reports and providing invaluable analyses of emerging social policy and social development challenges within their respective regions. Their thoughtful contributions, grounded in diverse national and regional contexts, have laid the foundation for this global synthesis and ensured that the report reflects the voices, priorities, and lived realities of communities across the world.

ICSW also gratefully acknowledges the members of the ICSW International Consultative Board for their constructive observations, critical reflections, and valuable recommendations during the review process. Their intellectual engagement has strengthened the report's analytical quality, policy relevance, and global perspective.

We extend our deepest appreciation to Professor Sergei Zelenev, President of ICSW, for conceiving this idea and initiating the process through a comprehensive questionnaire circulated to all the regional committees. In addition to the reflective note he provided on ICSW's global initiatives, his visionary leadership, continuous encouragement, and substantive guidance throughout the preparation of the report helped us deliver it with a clear sense of purpose. Special thanks are also due to Professor Antonio López Peláez, Executive Director of ICSW, whose strategic direction, scholarly insights, and careful review have significantly enriched the report's conceptual framework and policy orientation, particularly in addressing emerging global challenges affecting social welfare and social work.

We further acknowledge the commitment of colleagues, researchers, practitioners, and members of the wider ICSW community whose expertise, comments, and exchange of ideas have contributed to improving the quality and relevance of this publication. Their collective efforts demonstrate the strength of international collaboration in advancing evidence-informed social policy and promoting inclusive and sustainable development.

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the information presented, the interpretations and analyses contained in this report remain those of the editors and do not necessarily represent the official views of all contributing individuals or institutions.

It is hoped that the *ICSW Global Situation Report 2026* will serve as a valuable resource for governments, international organizations, civil society, academia, and social work professionals in shaping policies and actions that advance human dignity, social justice, and inclusive social development, leaving no one behind.

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Table of Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>Acknowledgment</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Acronyms and Abbreviations</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	1
1. Regional Priorities: Contemporary Social Policy Dilemmas and Welfare Challenges	5
1.1. Demographic Pressures, Employment, and the Crisis of Social Protection	5
1.2. Poverty, Inequality, and Social Exclusion	7
1.3. Economic Constraints and the Retrenchment of Social Investment	8
1.4. Climate Change and the Ecological Crisis	8
1.5. Conflicts, Displacement, and Human Insecurity	9
1.6. Governance, Democratic Decline, and Trust Deficits	9
1.7. Digital Transformation and Technological Inequality	10
1.8. Summing up	10
2. Shared Responsibility and Cooperation	11
3. Role of Social Workers and Social Development Practitioners	12
4. Responding to Global Crises	15
4.1 Interconnected Crises and Structural Vulnerabilities	15
4.2 Climate Change, Environmental Risks, and Human Security	15
4.3 Social Protection and Resilient Welfare Systems	15
4.4. Labour Markets, Demographic Change, and Technological Advancement	16
4.5 Migration, Displacement, and Social Inclusion	16
4.6 Governance, Social Cohesion, and Collective Action	17
4.7 Key Principles for Responding to Global Crises	17
5. From Vision to Action	17
5.1 Strengthening Governance, Coordination, and Cooperation	18
5.2 Data, Knowledge, and Evidence-Based Policymaking	18
5.3 Building Adaptive and Inclusive Social Protection Systems	18
5.4 Promoting Decent Work, Care Systems, and Inclusive Economies	19
5.5 Advancing Climate Resilience and Social Justice	19
5.6 Strengthening Social Cohesion, Civic Participation, and Community Resilience	20
5.7 Towards a Shared Agenda for Action	20
6. Conclusion and Path Ahead	21
References	24

Acronyms and Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
IASSW	International Association of Schools of Social Work
ICSD	International Consortium for Social Development
ICSW	International Council on Social Welfare
IFSW	International Federation of Social Workers
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SWSD	(Joint Conference of) Social Work Education and Social Development
UN	United Nations
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDRR	United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Introduction

We are living through a period of profound transformation. The global economic order that shaped international relations, development trajectories, and social policy frameworks over the past eighty years is undergoing a fundamental reset. Established assumptions are increasingly contested, while new institutional arrangements and normative frameworks are still emerging. The result is not merely uncertainty, but a deeper condition of epistemic uncertainty—a widespread sense that the future itself has become difficult to anticipate, interpret, and govern. And that is precisely why international organisations such as the ICSW, which seek to establish a shared understanding of the issues and disseminate best practices, are more relevant than ever, building bridges in a context marked by the redefinition of alliances between countries and the crisis of globalisation.

This moment compels us to ask a critical question: *Why does the global social and economic system require remapping?*

Over recent decades, globalisation has intensified economic interdependence and contributed to unprecedented growth in trade, technological innovation, and connectivity. Yet these gains have been unevenly distributed. In many advanced economies, globalisation is associated with the erosion of domestic manufacturing, growing insecurity among working populations, and widening disparities in wealth and opportunity. Simultaneously, many low- and middle-income countries continue to confront persistent structural inequalities despite periods of economic expansion. The crisis triggered by COVID-19 was not merely a health crisis: it has called into question the model of globalisation, particularly in Western countries (which suddenly found themselves unable to produce basic medical supplies), accelerating a process of deglobalisation and a crisis within international organisations. The current context, characterised by geostrategic realignments stemming from armed conflicts, AI, the military and space races, and climate change, once again brings to the forefront the need to rebuild bridges and create spaces for dialogue that allow for a collective response to challenges—such as AI or climate change—that threaten the very survival of humanity.

Social welfare systems lie at the centre of these transformations because they embody fundamental societal choices concerning solidarity, justice, and the distribution of resources. Social welfare is a collective endeavour, both within each country and among countries. Such choices are inherently political. Decisions regarding who receives support, under what conditions, and through which institutional mechanisms cannot be reduced to purely technical or administrative calculations. Whether framed as debates over universalism versus selectivity, state versus market provision, or rights versus responsibilities, social policy ultimately reflects competing social visions and political priorities. The legitimacy and effectiveness of welfare systems, therefore, depend not only on economic capacity but also on meaningful political participation and democratic accountability.

At the same time, rapid advances in artificial intelligence are reshaping governance and public administration, with significant implications for the future architecture of social welfare systems worldwide. AI should not be understood merely as a technical innovation. Rather, it functions as a transformative mediating force that reconfigures institutional relationships,

decision-making processes, labour markets, and the distribution of social risks and opportunities. While technological innovation increasingly dominates contemporary policy discourse, understanding its implications requires broader theoretical and ethical frameworks capable of addressing questions of power, inclusion, and human agency.

These developments unfold alongside escalating global crises. Reports from ICSW-affiliated organisations across regions continue to document the severe social consequences of climate change, including threats to food security, public health, livelihoods, and human survival. Severe material and social deprivation is rising globally, affecting not only disadvantaged groups but also increasingly segments of the middle class, including in high-income countries. Rising living costs, deepening inequality, forced displacement, and fragile labour markets have pushed millions into conditions of insecurity and poverty, even in regions experiencing economic growth. These challenges cannot be addressed solely through short-term or fragmented policy responses. They require inclusive, people-centred approaches that can strengthen long-term social resilience.

The contemporary political landscape further complicates these challenges. Intensifying political polarisation, declining public trust, and the growing influence of profit-driven digital media ecosystems have contributed to heightened uncertainty in governance across many societies. Younger generations, in particular, are increasingly shaped by fragmented information environments that influence political participation, social cohesion, and public discourse. In numerous countries, unmet expectations, political disillusionment, and institutional compromises have weakened confidence in democratic processes and strained the foundations of welfare provision.

Understanding these transformations requires moving beyond fragmented or purely descriptive approaches to social policy analysis. Welfare systems are embedded within broader societal configurations that include labour markets, family structures, political institutions, cultural norms, and governance traditions. Their diversity cannot be adequately captured through simplistic classifications or linear developmental hierarchies. Rather, welfare regimes are better understood as complex constellations of interdependent institutional arrangements, socio-economic dynamics, and evolving political compromises.

Within this context, ICSW continues its longstanding mission as a global civil society organisation dedicated to advancing social justice, social welfare, and people-centred social development. Advocacy, knowledge creation, and knowledge dissemination remain central to its work. Through its monthly newsletter, ICSW informs its global readership about major developments in social welfare and social policy. ICSW has also sponsored several edited volumes published by Routledge. Its forthcoming publication, scheduled for release in September 2026, examines social participation in the age of artificial intelligence and draws in part on discussions from the Ronda seminars convened by ICSW in Spain in 2024 and 2025.

Over the past three years, ICSW has promoted three global declarations—also endorsed by International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)—that outline strategies for addressing key challenges to citizens' well-being. On September 29, 2023, the ICSW Windhoek Declaration on Social Policy and Social

Protection in Africa¹ was adopted in Windhoek, Namibia, endorsed by the Ministry of Health and Social Services of Namibia, and supported by the African Union and the IASSW, establishing a shared set of strategies to strengthen social protection in Africa. On November 16, 2023, the ICSW adopted the Lisbon Declaration for the Development of Social Work and Humanitarian Action in the 21st Century², which addresses the strengthening of humanitarian aid, the improvement of social workers' competencies and skills, the design of new training programs, and the need to prioritise participation and co-design as strategies to improve social inclusion. In this sense, this declaration is a highly relevant contribution to social work in humanitarian aid, approved by unanimous consensus of the IFSW, IASSW, and ICSW. On April 25, 2025, the aspirational ICSW Ronda Declaration 2025 on Meaningful Participation, Inclusive Social Welfare, and Democratic Local Governance was adopted by the ICSW, the IFSW, and the IASSW, with the primary objective of promoting citizen participation as a key element for the sustainability, effectiveness, and legitimacy of social protection systems³.

In collaboration with longstanding partners, including IASSW and the IFSW—as well as newer partnerships with the International Consortium for Social Development (ICSD), ICSW continues to strengthen global dialogue on social development. These collaborations contributed to several side events organized during the Second World Summit for Social Development in Doha, Qatar, reflecting a shared commitment to reimagining social policy for a rapidly changing world.

In the backdrop of longstanding commitment to inclusive social policies, promoting and strengthening democratic and resilient welfare systems and in preparation for the Joint World Conference on Social Work, Education and Social Development (SWSD 2026) in Nairobi, Kenya, the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) initiated a Global Situation Report to understand emerging social challenges, policy priorities, and opportunities for collective action across different regions. The report is based on contributions from nine regions of ICSW worldwide. Through this report, ICSW aims to showcase the diversity of social welfare realities while identifying concerns that affect Social Policy, Social Protection, Social Development, and Human Well-being in a complex and uncertain world.

Regional reports reflect this growing interdependence of social, economic, ecological, demographic, and political processes. The reports document growing inequality, persistent poverty, social exclusion, armed conflicts, forced displacement, climate change, demographic shifts, public health challenges and technological disruption. These, along with declining social cohesion, are reshaping the conditions under which people live and communities function. These developments are creating new vulnerabilities while simultaneously exposing longstanding structural inequalities that continue to limit opportunities for social inclusion and sustainable development.

¹ www.icsw.org/images/News/2023/11/ICSW_Winhoek_Declaration_2023.pdf

² <https://www.icsw.org/index.php/news/189-lisbon-declaration-for-the-development-of-social-work-and-humanitarian-action-in-the-21st-century>

³ <https://www.icsw.org/es/publications/newsletters/276-ronda-conference-rethinking-participation-for-responsive-and-adaptive-welfare-systems>

The International Council on Social Welfare also recognises that these challenges are interconnected and require responses that are not fragmented. Issues such as climate change, migration, labour market transformation, ageing, public health emergencies, and social protection deficits are not limited to any one country or policy sector. The growing mismatch between expanding human needs and weakening institutional capacities represents one of the defining challenges of the present era (United Nations, 2023). Addressing them requires integrated approaches that combine social, economic, and environmental objectives while strengthening cooperation among governments, civil society organisations, communities, international institutions, professional bodies, and citizens.

The Global Situation Report provides a platform for reflection, comparative analysis and shared learning. It aims to document realities, identify common priorities, emerging trends and innovative responses that can contribute to future policy discussions. The report supports dialogue at the Social Work, Education and Social Development Conference by strengthening cooperation within the ICSW network and highlighting opportunities for solidarity, mutual learning, and collective action.

Recognising the diversity of regional contexts, ICSW developed a consultation framework to guide regional submissions. The framework encourages analytical reflections on key issues affecting Social Welfare and Social Development while facilitating the synthesis of regional perspectives into a coherent global narrative.

The consultation process was structured around five interrelated themes:

1. **Regional Priorities (2025–2026):** Identifying the most significant social, economic, political, and environmental challenges currently affecting each region.
2. **Shared Responsibility and Cooperation:** Exploring how communities, institutions, governments, civil society organisations, and individuals can strengthen cooperation and collective action in addressing shared challenges.
3. **Role of Social Workers and Social Development Practitioners:** Examining how professionals in the social field contribute to building inclusion, resilience, social cohesion, and human well-being in diverse and often crisis-affected contexts.
4. **Responding to Global Crises:** Assessing the implications of conflict, poverty, inequality, exclusion, displacement, and ecological challenges, and identifying approaches that promote resilience and social justice.
5. **From Vision to Action:** Highlighting concrete initiatives, policy innovations, partnerships, and institutional mechanisms that can translate shared aspirations into sustainable practice and measurable outcomes.

The responses received from the regions reveal both significant diversity and remarkable convergence. While the specific challenges, institutional arrangements, and policy priorities vary across regions, common concerns emerged include inequality, social protection, demographic change, climate vulnerability, migration and displacement, labour market insecurity, social cohesion, and the need for stronger, more inclusive governance systems. The

reports also show a shared commitment to strengthening Social Welfare systems advancing justice protecting human dignity and promoting sustainable and inclusive development.

This synthesis report brings together these regional perspectives to identify common trends, shared priorities, and emerging directions for action. While it does not seek to provide a comprehensive account of every regional reality, it offers a collective reflection on the state of social welfare and social development at a time of significant global transformation. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing international discussions on social policy, social protection, human rights, sustainable development, and the future role of social welfare institutions in building more inclusive, resilient, and equitable societies. Through the following sections, the report present a global perspective rooted in regional experiences and informed by a shared commitment to social justice, human dignity, and collective well-being.

1. Regional Priorities: Contemporary Social Policy Dilemmas and Welfare Challenges

Although each region faces distinct historical, political, and socio-economic realities, the regional reports reveal several converging concerns that together define the contemporary global social policy landscape.

Consistent with recent international assessments of global social development, including those of the United Nations and other multilateral institutions, the reports highlight the growing interdependence of social, economic, ecological, demographic, and political processes. The current period is increasingly characterised not simply by isolated crises, but by overlapping and mutually reinforcing vulnerabilities. Poverty interacts with conflict; demographic change intensifies pressures on labour markets and care systems; ecological degradation undermines livelihoods and social stability; while institutional fragility weakens states' capacity to respond effectively.

The reports therefore point to a central contemporary dilemma in social policy: while social risks are becoming more interconnected, policy responses often remain fragmented, reactive, and constrained by short-term political and fiscal considerations. The growing mismatch between expanding human needs and weakening institutional capacities represents one of the defining challenges of the present era.

The regional contributions collectively underscore the importance of integrated, rights-based social policies that balance economic development, social cohesion, democratic participation, environmental sustainability, and human security. In this context, implementing the UN Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remains both essential and increasingly difficult.

The challenges identified in the regional reports are organised into several broad and interconnected categories as follows.

1.1. Demographic Pressures, Employment, and the Crisis of Social Protection

The reports reveal that demographic realities differ sharply across regions, producing highly uneven social policy pressures. In many countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, as well as across large parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, societies continue to experience rapid population growth and significant youth expansion. In several MENA countries, more than half of the population is under 30 (United Nations Population Fund, 2024) and countries in East and West Africa have some of the youngest populations in the world. While such demographic dynamics could constitute an important developmental asset, insufficient employment generation, weak labour-market absorption, inadequate educational systems, and limited social investment have turned this potential into a major source of vulnerability and frustration.

Youth unemployment remains one of the clearest manifestations of this dilemma (International Labour Organisation, 2024). Large numbers of young people are unable to secure stable employment or meaningful social mobility, leading many to take up informal and precarious livelihoods. This creates economic hardship, social alienation, distrust in institutions and political instability. Recent youth-led mobilisations in several African countries illustrate how demographic pressures can rapidly translate into broader governance crises when opportunities for inclusion remain limited.

On the other hand, many high-income and industrialised societies face an opposite challenge: ageing populations, declining fertility rates, shrinking labour forces, and rising dependency ratios. Europe, North America, and Northeast Asia are increasingly under pressure on pension systems, healthcare infrastructure, and long-term care arrangements. In several countries, social protection systems designed during periods of demographic expansion are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain financially and institutionally. This creates a profound social policy dilemma. On the one hand, ageing societies require expanded investments in healthcare, pensions, and care services. On the other hand, slower economic growth, fiscal constraints, and labour shortages limit governments' ability to expand social expenditure. Consequently, many welfare systems are being restructured under conditions of austerity, privatisation, or reduced public coverage, generating growing insecurity among vulnerable populations.

Several regions, particularly South East Asia and parts of the Pacific, simultaneously experience both youth expansion and rapid ageing, producing a "dual demographic burden." This places extraordinary pressure on working age populations, and public institutions are expected to support both younger and older generations simultaneously.

Rapid urbanisation further intensifies these demographic challenges (UN-Habitat, 2024). Megacities across South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa are growing rapidly, yet often lack corresponding investments in housing, sanitation, healthcare, education, transportation, and social infrastructure. Informal settlements and precarious urban livelihoods increasingly reflect the inability of existing development models to absorb demographic transformation in socially sustainable ways.

Collectively, these demographic trends point to a broader crisis of social reproduction and welfare sustainability. The regional reports repeatedly emphasise the growing need for universal and adaptive social protection systems capable of addressing changing labour

markets, evolving family structures, migration pressures, and rising demands for care and social security.

1.2. Poverty, Inequality, and Social Exclusion

The persistence and deepening of poverty and inequality remain among the most central concerns in most regional reports. Despite significant improvements in global living standards during previous decades, recent developments, including the COVID-19 pandemic, inflationary pressures, armed conflicts, and ecological disruptions, have slowed or reversed social progress in many parts of the world (United Nations, 2024).

The reports highlight an increasingly troubling paradox: while global wealth has continued to expand, large segments of the population experience rising insecurity, declining purchasing power, and reduced access to basic services, underscoring that economic growth does not automatically translate into social inclusion or equitable distribution.

Extreme poverty remains heavily concentrated in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, conflict-affected regions of the Middle East, Afghanistan, and other fragile contexts. However, the reports also emphasise that vulnerability extends far beyond those living below official poverty lines. Hundreds of millions of people globally remain only marginally above conditions of extreme deprivation and are highly exposed to economic shocks, unemployment, inflation, health crises, environmental disasters or political conflicts.

An important social policy dilemma emerging from the reports is regarding the growing disconnect between macroeconomic indicators and lived social realities. In many countries, aggregate growth figures coexist with worsening inequalities, deteriorating public services, informalisation of labour, and declining social mobility. This has weakened confidence in traditional development paradigms and intensified perceptions of exclusion and injustice. The reports further stress that inequality today is increasingly multidimensional and structural. It intersects with geography, gender, ethnicity, race, caste, migration status, disability, and access to education and technology. Social exclusion is therefore not merely an economic phenomenon but also a political and institutional one, affecting participation, representation, and access to rights.

In Europe and North America, rising housing costs, inflation, precarious employment, and welfare retrenchment have generated growing economic insecurity even within affluent societies. Child poverty, homelessness, food insecurity, and mental health pressures are increasingly visible. Simultaneously, public debates surrounding migration, identity, and welfare entitlement have contributed to social fragmentation and political polarisation.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, longstanding structural inequalities continue to intersect with violence, racism, gender-based discrimination, and exclusion of indigenous communities. In South Asia, inequality remains deeply embedded in caste structures, regional disparities, and unequal access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities.

The reports consistently underline that current welfare systems are often poorly equipped to address the complexity of contemporary exclusion. Social assistance programs remain

fragmented, underfunded, or narrowly targeted, while universal systems frequently face political and fiscal pressures.

The broader dilemma, therefore, concerns the future direction of social policy itself: whether societies will continue moving toward residual and market-driven welfare arrangements, or whether renewed commitments to universalism, redistribution, and social solidarity can emerge under increasingly constrained global conditions.

1.3. Economic Constraints and the Retrenchment of Social Investment

Underlying many of the challenges identified in the reports are broader economic constraints that increasingly limit states' capacity to pursue inclusive social development.

The current decade is marked by slowing global economic growth, persistent debt burdens, inflationary pressures, technological disruption, and geopolitical instability. These dynamics have significantly reduced fiscal space in many countries, particularly in the Global South, where debt servicing increasingly competes with investments in healthcare, education, housing, and social protection (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024).

The regional reports reveal growing concern regarding the social consequences of economic policy choices. In many contexts, economic adjustment measures continue to prioritise macroeconomic stabilisation over social investment, often resulting in weakened welfare systems and reduced public services.

In several regions, defence expenditures and security-related spending have increased substantially in response to geopolitical tensions and armed conflicts. While security concerns are often legitimate, the reports repeatedly warn that the expansion of military budgets frequently occurs at the expense of long-term investments in human development and social cohesion.

Labour markets themselves are also undergoing a profound transformation. Informalisation, precarious employment, automation, and platform-based forms of work are reshaping employment relations while weakening traditional labour protection and social insurance systems (International Labour Organisation, 2024). Large segments of workers, particularly women, migrants, and young people, remain excluded from stable employment and adequate social security coverage.

The reports, therefore, highlight a major contradiction of contemporary economic governance where economies continue to generate considerable wealth and technological advancement, yet millions remain excluded from decent work, social security, and basic human dignity.

1.4. Climate Change and the Ecological Crisis

Environmental degradation and climate change are central threats to social development, social stability, and human security (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023). The ecological crisis is no longer viewed solely as an environmental concern but increasingly as a fundamental social policy challenge. Climate-related disasters intensify poverty, displacement, food insecurity, health risks, and competition over scarce resources (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023; United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2023).

Vulnerable populations — particularly low-income communities, rural populations, indigenous groups, women, children, and displaced persons are disproportionately affected. Countries and communities that contribute least to global emissions are often those most severely affected by climate-related destruction (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023). At the same time, many low-income countries lack the financial and institutional resources necessary for effective adaptation and resilience-building.

The reports describe recurring droughts, floods, rising sea levels, desertification, extreme heat, wildfires, and environmental degradation across virtually all regions. These developments undermine livelihoods, disrupt local economies, and place additional pressure on already fragile welfare systems.

A key dilemma identified throughout the reports concerns the unequal distribution of both environmental harm and adaptive capacity. The reports also emphasise that climate policies themselves may generate new forms of inequality if social justice considerations are neglected. Ecological transition strategies that fail to protect employment, livelihoods, and vulnerable populations risk deepening social fragmentation and political resistance.

1.5. Conflicts, Displacement, and Human Insecurity

Several global reports suggest that millions of people remain displaced internally or across borders, often for prolonged periods and under extremely precarious conditions (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2024). Displacement places extraordinary pressure on host communities, welfare systems, housing, labour markets, education systems, and healthcare infrastructures. At the same time, displaced populations frequently experience exclusion, legal insecurity, discrimination, and restricted access to social rights.

The regional reports identify conflict, forced displacement, and human insecurity as among the most destabilising contemporary global trends. Armed conflicts, political violence, occupation, and state fragility continue to generate massive humanitarian crises across multiple regions.

The reports repeatedly underline that prolonged displacement increasingly risks becoming normalised rather than resolved. Camps, informal settlements, and temporary humanitarian arrangements often evolve into semi-permanent realities with inadequate prospects for integration, return, or sustainable livelihoods.

This creates a profound challenge for social policy and international cooperation. Existing humanitarian mechanisms are frequently designed for short-term emergency responses, while contemporary displacement crises require long-term social protection, inclusion, and development-oriented approaches (International Organisation for Migration, 2024; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2024).

1.6. Governance, Democratic Decline, and Trust Deficits

Corruption, political polarisation, restrictions on civic space, weakening rule of law, and declining public confidence increasingly undermine social cohesion and the legitimacy of public institutions (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024; United Nations, 2023). Several reports describe contexts in which citizens perceive political systems

as unable or unwilling to address social inequalities, economic insecurity, or environmental degradation.

Many regional reports point to growing democratic fragility, declining institutional trust, and widening distance between governing structures and citizens. The erosion of democratic governance has direct implications for social policy. Effective welfare systems depend not only on financial resources but also on institutional legitimacy, public trust, participation, accountability, and social solidarity. Where trust declines, support for redistributive policies and collective responsibility often weakens as well.

The reports further highlight the shrinking space for civil society organisations, community-based actors, and rights-based advocacy movements in several regions. This limits opportunities for inclusive dialogue and weakens democratic participation precisely when social cooperation is most needed.

1.7. Digital Transformation and Technological Inequality

The accelerated expansion of digital technologies and artificial intelligence is transforming economies, labour markets, public administration, and social interaction worldwide (International Telecommunication Union, 2024; United Nations, 2024).

The regional reports reiterate the significant opportunities associated with digitalisation, including expanded access to information, improved service delivery, and enhanced communication. However, they also underline serious risks linked to surveillance, misinformation, labour displacement, digital exclusion and technological inequality. Individuals and communities lacking access to digital infrastructure risk further marginalisation in increasingly digitalised societies.

The growing use of algorithmic systems and artificial intelligence (AI) in welfare administration also raises important ethical and professional concerns. Automated decision-making may reinforce existing biases, reduce transparency, and weaken human-centred approaches in social services (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2023). Algorithmic bias, lack of transparency and accountability measures, ethical and legal concerns, and, most importantly, the digital divide continue to be serious concerns (Boetto, 2025) when deploying AI in social development sectors. While digital technologies and AI-enabled tools are transforming governance, service delivery, and teaching and learning practices, emerging challenges include vulnerabilities among children and young people who spend increasing amounts of time on digital platforms. These developments underscore the need for social policies and social work practices that promote digital inclusion, ethical AI, digital literacy, and the protection of human rights in an increasingly digital society.

For social work and social development practice, the challenge lies in balancing technological innovation with the preservation of human relationships, empathy, participation, and professional ethics.

1.8. Summing up

Taken together, the ICSW regional reports present a complex and deeply interconnected picture of contemporary global social challenges. While manifestations differ across regions,

several common dilemmas recur. Rising inequality amid economic growth, expanding social risks alongside weakening welfare capacities, ecological urgency combined with political fragmentation, and growing human needs confronting constrained public institutions are a few emerging concerns.

The reports suggest that contemporary social policy cannot be understood narrowly as a mechanism of redistribution or poverty alleviation alone. Rather, it increasingly constitutes a central framework for addressing broader questions of social cohesion, democratic legitimacy, human security, sustainability, and community resilience.

In this context, strengthening inclusive, rights-based, and participatory social welfare systems is not only a moral imperative but also a prerequisite for social stability and sustainable development in the decades ahead. Participatory governance is a mechanism not only to engage citizens in governance processes but also to enhance legitimacy, accountability, and policy effectiveness through the inclusion of diverse actors and knowledge systems (Fung, 2004; Calderón 2024).

2. Shared Responsibility and Cooperation

Regional Reports reflect critical concerns such as poverty, inequality, demographic change, climate-related risks, migration, public health challenges, labour market transformations, and social exclusion are overarching contexts on the social development front. Across all regions, a clear consensus emerges that these contemporary social challenges are increasingly interconnected and cannot be effectively addressed through isolated actions by individual institutions, sectors, or countries. The regional reports consistently underscore that sustainable social development depends upon shared responsibility among governments, civil society, organisations, communities, international institutions, the private sector, and citizens themselves.

Social protection, as a collective societal responsibility, is emerging as a recurring theme throughout the reports and is considered a cornerstone of social cohesion, resilience, and inclusive development. Regional contributions highlight the importance of strengthening universal, rights-based, and adaptive social protection systems that can respond to both persistent vulnerabilities and emerging crises. Particular attention is given to populations that often remain insufficiently protected, including informal workers, migrants, displaced persons, women, older persons, children, and persons with disabilities.

The reports further emphasise that effective cooperation must operate across multiple levels of governance, including local authorities, civil society, professional associations, and grassroots initiatives. They function as essential partners in identifying needs, mobilising resources, and delivering context-sensitive responses. Meaningful participation by affected populations is repeatedly highlighted as critical for ensuring that policies are responsive, inclusive, and sustainable. Such participatory approaches contribute to stronger social trust, enhanced accountability, and greater ownership of development processes

At the policy level, the reports advocate for greater integration across sectors and institutions. Many contemporary social challenges cut across traditional administrative boundaries and therefore require coordinated approaches that link social protection, health, education,

employment, housing, care services, and environmental sustainability. Fragmented responses are increasingly viewed as inadequate in addressing multidimensional vulnerabilities, while integrated policy frameworks offer greater potential to promote inclusion, efficiency, and long-term resilience

The reports acknowledge that many of the most pressing challenges facing societies today, including climate change, migration and displacement, public health emergencies, labour mobility, environmental degradation, and disaster risk, transcend national borders and require collaborative solutions. Strengthened cooperation among countries, regional bodies, international organisations, and development partners is viewed as essential for sharing knowledge, mobilising resources, coordinating responses, and promoting equitable and sustainable development outcomes. Such cooperation is particularly important for addressing disparities in institutional capacity and ensuring that no region or population is left behind.

Another important dimension emerging from the reports is the role of trust, accountability, and democratic participation in advancing shared responsibility. Effective social policies depend not only on financial and institutional resources but also on public confidence in institutions, transparent governance, and opportunities for meaningful civic engagement. Strengthening participation in decision-making processes and fostering inclusive dialogue are viewed as critical for reinforcing social solidarity and renewing the social contract between citizens and institutions

Taken together, the regional reports point to a common understanding that pursuing social justice, human well-being, and sustainable development requires renewed commitments to solidarity, cooperation, and collective action. Shared responsibility is presented not merely as a normative principle but as a practical necessity in an increasingly interdependent world. Strengthening social protection systems, investing in human capabilities, supporting community participation, and deepening regional and international cooperation emerge as mutually reinforcing pathways for building more inclusive, resilient, and equitable societies. Expanding social protection is increasingly recognised not only as a poverty-reduction measure but also as an investment in social cohesion, human development, and economic resilience (International Labour Organisation, 2024; United Nations, 2024).

3. Role of Social Workers and Social Development Practitioners

Across all regions, social workers and social development practitioners are portrayed as indispensable actors in advancing social welfare, strengthening social protection systems, and promoting inclusive and sustainable development. As societies confront increasingly complex and interconnected challenges—including poverty, inequality, demographic change, migration and displacement, climate-related crises, public health emergencies, conflict, and rapid technological transformation—the role of professionals in the social field has expanded considerably. No longer confined primarily to addressing individual needs and vulnerabilities, social workers and social development practitioners are increasingly engaged at community, institutional, national, and global levels as facilitators of social inclusion, advocates for social justice, contributors to policy development, and agents of social transformation.

The regional reports consistently highlight that the growing complexity of social challenges has increased both the demand for and the strategic importance of professional social intervention. Ageing populations, changing family structures, expanding urbanisation, labour market insecurity, forced displacement, widening inequalities, and the increasing frequency of climate-related disasters have placed new demands on welfare institutions and social protection systems.

A common finding across the reports is that social workers and social development practitioners operate at the critical interface between public policy and people's everyday lives. Through their direct engagement with individuals, families, groups, and communities, they translate policy commitments into practical support while simultaneously conveying lived experiences and emerging social needs back into policy processes. This intermediary role enables them to identify gaps in service provision, strengthen access to social protection, promote participation, and support more responsive and accountable institutions.

The reports also demonstrate the increasingly important contribution of social workers and social development practitioners to strengthening community resilience. In regions affected by climate change, environmental degradation, disasters, conflict, displacement, and economic shocks, professionals play a key role in supporting preparedness, recovery, adaptation, and long-term resilience-building. Their work often combines psychosocial support, community mobilisation, livelihood strengthening, social protection outreach, and the facilitation of collective action.

Another recurring theme is the role of professionals in fostering social inclusion and creating spaces of belonging. Across diverse social and political contexts, social workers and social development practitioners support the participation of marginalised and vulnerable populations, including children, older persons, persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees, displaced populations, women, youth, and minority groups. Through advocacy, community engagement, and rights-based practice, they help reduce barriers to participation and improve access to services, opportunities, and social protection.

The reports further underscore the importance of social workers and social development practitioners in facilitating dialogue, mediation, and peacebuilding. In contexts characterised by social tensions, political polarisation, community conflict, displacement, or intergroup mistrust, professionals often act as neutral facilitators, promoting dialogue, mutual understanding, and reconciliation. By supporting participatory processes, strengthening local institutions, and creating safe spaces for engagement, they contribute to conflict prevention, social stability, and the rebuilding of trust between communities and institutions. These functions are particularly important in fragile settings where social cohesion and social capital have been weakened by conflict, exclusion, or prolonged crises.

A significant development emerging from the regional reports is the growing role of social workers and social development practitioners in policy advocacy and systems strengthening. Increasingly, professionals are expected not only to deliver services but also to contribute to the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of social policies and programmes. Their proximity to communities and vulnerable populations provides valuable insights into emerging risks, unmet needs, and the effectiveness of existing interventions.

The regional reports also highlight the need for continued investment in the social service workforce itself. While expectations placed on social workers and social development practitioners continue to expand, many regions report challenges, including workforce shortages, limited resources, inadequate professional recognition, and increasing workloads. Strengthening education, training, professional development, working conditions, and workforce planning is therefore essential to ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of social welfare and social protection systems.

Taken together, the regional reports reveal a broad transformation in the professional role of social workers and social development practitioners. While direct service provision remains a core function, their responsibilities increasingly encompass community development, resilience-building, policy advocacy, conflict mediation, and social innovation. Across diverse contexts, they emerge not simply as providers of support but as essential actors in advancing social justice, strengthening social protection, fostering social cohesion, and contributing to more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable societies.

It is amply clear that social workers and social development practitioners play a critical role in ensuring that social policies and programmes effectively reach those most at risk of exclusion and vulnerability. Their contribution aligns closely with international commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals, universal social protection, decent work, social inclusion, and the principle of leaving no one behind (United Nations, 2024a; International Labour Organisation, 2024a). Their work is increasingly viewed not only as supporting individuals but also as strengthening the inclusiveness and cohesion of societies as a whole (International Council on Social Welfare, 2025). In many contexts, they serve as bridge-builders between citizens, communities, civil society organisations, and public authorities, helping to strengthen trust, social cohesion, and democratic engagement (López Peláez, 2024).

As a result, they are well-positioned to inform evidence-based policymaking and advocate for more equitable, accessible, and inclusive social protection systems. This role reflects broader international recognition that effective social policy requires both institutional capacity and meaningful engagement with those directly affected by social challenges (International Labour Organisation, 2024; United Nations, 2024; Zelenev, 2025). It is in this context that the recent international discussions on care economies, social service workforce development, and integrated social policies emphasise the importance of investing in human capabilities and professional capacity as a prerequisite for inclusive development (International Labour Organisation, 2024; International Council on Social Welfare, 2025).

In conclusion, four interrelated functions emerge consistently across the regions as;

- Building spaces of belonging and inclusion;
- Facilitating dialogue, mediation, and peacebuilding;
- Strengthening community resilience and adaptive capacity; and
- Advancing policy advocacy and systems strengthening.

These functions collectively position social workers and social development practitioners as critical partners in the realisation of effective social welfare systems, universal social protection, and sustainable social development.

4. Responding to Global Crises

4.1 Interconnected Crises and Structural Vulnerabilities

The regional reports collectively portray a world increasingly shaped by multiple, interconnected, and mutually reinforcing crises. Poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, conflict, displacement, public health emergencies, economic uncertainty, and democratic fragmentation are no longer experienced as separate challenges but as overlapping risks that interact across social, economic, environmental, and political systems. The reports consistently emphasise that responding effectively to these realities requires integrated, rights-based, and forward-looking approaches that strengthen both human resilience and institutional capacity.

A central finding across the regions is that contemporary crises reveal and amplify underlying structural vulnerabilities. Longstanding inequalities associated with income, gender, age, disability, ethnicity, migration status, and geographic location often determine who is most exposed to shocks and who has the least capacity to recover from them. Climate-related disasters, economic downturns, conflicts, and public health crises disproportionately affect populations already facing social and economic disadvantage, thereby deepening existing inequalities and creating new forms of vulnerability. The reports, therefore, underscore the importance of addressing the structural drivers of exclusion alongside immediate humanitarian and crisis-response measures.

4.2 Climate Change, Environmental Risks, and Human Security

Climate change emerges throughout the reports as one of the most significant and far-reaching challenges confronting societies. Environmental degradation, extreme weather events, water insecurity, food system disruptions, and climate-induced displacement are increasingly affecting livelihoods, health, housing, and social cohesion. The reports stress that climate change should not be viewed solely as an environmental concern but as a profound social policy challenge with implications for poverty reduction, social protection, employment, migration, and community resilience.

Across several regions, climate resilience is increasingly viewed as inseparable from social resilience, requiring coordinated investments in both environmental and social infrastructure. As recognised by international policy frameworks, effective climate responses require integrating environmental sustainability, disaster risk reduction, and social protection measures to ensure that adaptation and resilience-building efforts are both equitable and inclusive (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023; United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2023).

4.3 Social Protection and Resilient Welfare Systems

Across all regions, social protection systems are identified as a cornerstone of effective crisis response and long-term resilience. The reports highlight the critical role of social protection in mitigating the impacts of economic shocks, disasters, displacement, unemployment, illness, and other forms of insecurity. At the same time, regional experiences reveal persistent challenges, including coverage gaps, fragmentation, financing constraints, administrative capacity constraints, and the exclusion of workers in informal employment.

While many countries have demonstrated the ability to expand assistance rapidly during periods of crisis, the reports emphasise the need to move beyond temporary and reactive measures toward universal, adaptive, and lifecycle-based social protection systems capable of anticipating and responding to future risks. Strengthening social protection is therefore viewed not only as a response to crisis but as a strategic investment in social cohesion, human development, and sustainable economic growth (International Labour Organisation, 2024; United Nations, 2024).

4.4. Labour Markets, Demographic Change, and Technological Advancement

The transformation of labour markets represents another major dimension of the global crisis landscape. Economic restructuring, automation, platform-based employment, and persistent informality are reshaping patterns of work and social security. While technological innovations create opportunities for economic participation and improved service delivery, they also risk widening inequalities where access to digital infrastructure, skills, and resources remains uneven.

The reports further identify demographic change as a significant driver of emerging social policy challenges. Many regions are simultaneously experiencing youth unemployment, population ageing, changing family structures, and increasing demands for care and support services. These developments are placing increasing pressure on labour markets, care systems, social protection institutions, and public finances. Long-term investments in human capabilities, care economies, and decent work are therefore viewed as essential components of resilient and inclusive development (United Nations, 2023; International Labour Organisation, 2024).

4.5 Migration, Displacement, and Social Inclusion

Migration and displacement constitute another prominent theme across the regional submissions. Increasingly driven by a combination of conflict, environmental pressures, economic insecurity, and demographic factors, human mobility presents complex challenges that transcend national boundaries. The reports advocate for coordinated regional and international approaches that protect the rights and dignity of migrants, refugees, and displaced populations while supporting host communities and strengthening pathways for social and economic inclusion.

Effective responses require not only humanitarian assistance but also access to social protection, healthcare, education, housing, and decent work opportunities. Social inclusion is

consistently identified as a critical condition for both individual well-being and social cohesion (International Organisation for Migration, 2024; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2024).

4.6 Governance, Social Cohesion, and Collective Action

The reports highlight growing concerns about social cohesion, public trust, and democratic governance. Political polarisation, misinformation, shrinking civic space, and declining confidence in public institutions can undermine collective responses to crises and weaken social solidarity. Several regions highlight the importance of transparent governance, participatory decision-making, effective public communication, and the protection of civic engagement as essential elements of resilient societies.

A consistent message emerging from the regional reports is that no single actor, sector, or country can effectively address contemporary crises alone. Governments, civil society organisations, international organisations, academic institutions, and the private sector all play important roles in developing coordinated and sustainable responses. The reports, therefore, call for renewed commitments to multilateral cooperation, policy coherence, knowledge sharing, and solidarity at local, national, regional, and global levels.

4.7 Key Principles for Responding to Global Crises

Taken together, the regional reports point to a common conclusion: responding to global crises requires shifting from fragmented, reactive interventions to integrated systems of social protection, inclusive social policies, resilient institutions, and cooperative governance.

Several shared principles emerge across all regions:

- Interconnected crises require integrated and whole-of-society responses.
- Universal and adaptive social protection systems are foundational to resilience.
- Climate change is both an environmental and a social policy challenge.
- Human mobility requires rights-based and cooperative responses.
- Social cohesion, trust, and democratic participation are critical components of resilience.
- Regional and international cooperation remain indispensable for addressing shared global challenges; and
- Community participation and local knowledge are essential components of effective and sustainable solutions.

5. From Vision to Action

The regional reports collectively demonstrate that addressing contemporary social challenges requires more than policy aspirations and normative commitments. While there is broad consensus on the goals of social justice, inclusion, sustainability, and human well-being, the effectiveness of these commitments ultimately depends on the capacity to translate vision into action through institutional innovation, policy coherence, and collaborative governance.

Across all regions, there is growing recognition that the transition from policy ambition to measurable outcomes requires stronger implementation mechanisms, integrated systems, and long-term partnerships among governments, civil society organisations, international institutions, academia, and the private sector.

5.1 Strengthening Governance, Coordination, and Cooperation

A prominent theme emerging from the regional reports is the need for more institutionalised mechanisms for cooperation and coordination. While numerous successful partnerships exist, many regions face persistent challenges of fragmented governance, overlapping mandates, and insufficient coordination across sectors and levels of government.

The reports therefore call for strengthened platforms for dialogue, joint planning, and collective action that bring together public institutions, civil society organisations, professional bodies, community representatives, and development partners. Several regional contributions further advocate for formalised frameworks that can support policy coordination, knowledge sharing, and collective responses to emerging crises.

In this context, international and regional cooperation remains particularly important. Strengthened multilateral engagement can facilitate the exchange of good practices, the mobilisation of resources, and the development of common approaches to shared challenges such as climate change, migration, demographic transitions, and the expansion of social protection (Zelenev, 2025; United Nations, 2024). Addressing complex social challenges that cut across traditional policy boundaries requires multi-stakeholder approaches involving governments, civil society, international organisations, communities and the private sector (Shajahan, 2018).

5.2 Data, Knowledge, and Evidence-Based Policymaking

The reports consistently emphasise that effective policymaking requires stronger data systems, improved monitoring mechanisms, and greater investment in evidence generation. Several regions highlight the importance of developing integrated social information systems capable of tracking poverty, inequality, social exclusion, migration, displacement, labour market trends, and climate vulnerability.

The growing availability of digital technologies presents significant opportunities to strengthen social policy planning, service delivery, and programme evaluation. However, the reports also caution that data systems must remain inclusive, transparent, and responsive to local realities. Quantitative indicators should be complemented by community knowledge, participatory assessments, and lived experiences to ensure that policies accurately reflect the needs of diverse populations.

Strengthening data and knowledge systems is therefore viewed not merely as a technical exercise but as a critical component of accountability, transparency, and effective governance (United Nations, 2024).

5.3 Building Adaptive and Inclusive Social Protection Systems

Across all regions, expanding and strengthening social protection systems emerges as one of the most important priorities for future action. The reports consistently advocate a shift from fragmented, reactive interventions to universal, inclusive, and adaptive systems capable of responding to evolving social risks throughout the life course.

This requires addressing persistent coverage gaps, particularly among informal workers, migrants, displaced populations, women, older persons, persons with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups. Equally important is the need to strengthen institutional capacity, financing mechanisms, and administrative systems that enable social protection programmes to respond effectively during periods of crisis. The reports further stress that social protection should not be viewed solely as a safety net but as a foundational investment in human development, social cohesion, and economic resilience.

Strong social protection systems contribute to poverty reduction, labour market participation, improved health and education outcomes, and greater societal resilience in the face of future shocks (International Labour Organisation, 2024; United Nations, 2024).

5.4 Promoting Decent Work, Care Systems, and Inclusive Economies

Many regional reports identify labour market transformation as a critical area requiring policy attention. Persistent informality, unemployment, underemployment, technological disruption, and changing demographic structures continue to challenge existing models of social and economic development.

Responding effectively requires integrated strategies that connect skills development, employment creation, labour market regulation, social protection, and economic inclusion. Particular attention is given to strengthening care systems and recognising the growing importance of the care economy as both a social investment and an economic opportunity.

Investments in decent work, lifelong learning, care infrastructure, and inclusive labour markets are increasingly viewed as essential for ensuring that economic transitions contribute to social progress and shared prosperity rather than widening inequality (International Labour Organisation, 2024; United Nations, 2023).

5.5 Advancing Climate Resilience and Social Justice

A recurring message across the reports is that climate action and social policy must be pursued in an integrated manner. Climate change is increasingly recognised as a driver of poverty, displacement, food insecurity, health risks, and social vulnerability, requiring responses that address both environmental and social dimensions simultaneously.

The reports therefore advocate for climate-resilient social protection systems, inclusive disaster risk reduction strategies, and investments in community resilience. Adaptation measures are most effective when linked to broader efforts to strengthen livelihoods, public services, social infrastructure, and local capacities. Several regions also emphasise the importance of ensuring that climate transitions are socially just and that vulnerable populations are not disproportionately burdened by environmental or economic adjustments.

5.6 Strengthening Social Cohesion, Civic Participation, and Community Resilience

The regional reports consistently underline the importance of trust, participation, and social cohesion as foundations for sustainable development. Rising polarisation, social fragmentation, misinformation, and declining trust in institutions have emerged as significant concerns in many contexts.

To address these challenges, the reports advocate for greater investment in community engagement, participatory governance, dialogue mechanisms, and platforms that amplify local voices and lived experiences. Particular emphasis is placed on the inclusion of marginalised populations, youth, Indigenous peoples, migrants, women, and persons with disabilities in decision-making processes.

Social workers, social development practitioners, community organisations, and civil society actors are viewed as critical partners in strengthening social cohesion, facilitating dialogue, and fostering collective action. Protecting civic space and supporting community-based initiatives are therefore seen as integral components of resilient and inclusive societies (International Council on Social Welfare, 2025; López Peláez, 2024). This essentially means that a people-centred development paradigm that places enormous emphasis on the engagement of communities, particularly those on the margins, in designing development programmes and their outcomes (Shajahan and Hulgård, 2020) is a need of the hour. Trust in institutions, democratic participation and accountable governance are increasingly viewed as prerequisites for social solidarity and effective social policy implementation (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2023; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024).

5.7 Towards a Shared Agenda for Action

Taken together, the regional reports point toward a common understanding that sustainable development requires a shift from fragmented interventions toward integrated, inclusive, and institutionalised approaches. While specific priorities vary across regions, several shared directions for action emerge consistently.

These include:

- Strengthening governance systems and institutionalised operation mechanisms;
- Expanding universal, adaptive, and lifecycle-based social protection systems;
- Building robust data systems and evidence-informed policymaking processes;
- Addressing the downside risks of the digitalisation and use of AI in daily lives of people;
- Promoting decent work, care economies, and inclusive economic development;
- Integrating climate resilience and social justice into development strategies;
- Strengthening social cohesion, civic participation, and community resilience; and
- Deepening regional and international cooperation to address shared challenges.

Ultimately, the regional reports suggest that progress will depend not only on the availability of resources and the quality of policy frameworks, but also on societies' ability to build trust, foster solidarity, strengthen institutions, and sustain collective action over time. The pathway from vision to action, therefore, lies in translating shared commitments into practical, measurable, and inclusive processes that improve human well-being and leave no one behind.

6. Conclusion and Path Ahead

The regional contributions highlight some overarching messages. First, social protection systems are increasingly recognised as essential foundations of resilience, social cohesion, and sustainable development. Second, climate change and environmental degradation are no longer viewed solely as ecological concerns but as profound social policy challenges with far-reaching implications for livelihoods, health, migration, and inequality. Third, the importance of community participation, civic engagement, and local knowledge is consistently emphasised as a prerequisite for effective and inclusive policy responses. Fourth, social workers and social development practitioners are increasingly seen as key actors in bridging policy and practice, strengthening community resilience, and supporting vulnerable populations. Finally, the reports underscore the importance of cooperation and solidarity at local, national, regional, and global levels in responding to challenges that no single institution or country can address alone.

This Global Situation Report offer a comprehensive and timely assessment of the state of social development across diverse regions of the world. While the contexts, histories, and institutional realities differ considerably, a striking degree of convergence emerges regarding the nature of the challenges confronting societies and the actions required to address them. Collectively, the reports reveal a world increasingly shaped by interconnected social, economic, demographic, environmental, and political transformations that are testing the capacity of existing institutions, policies, and governance systems to respond effectively.

A central message running throughout the report is that contemporary social challenges cannot be understood or addressed in isolation. Poverty, inequality, demographic change, climate vulnerability, displacement, labour market insecurity, technological transformation, and declining social trust interact in ways that reinforce one another and create new forms of vulnerability. The resulting risks transcend traditional policy boundaries and expose the limitations of fragmented and reactive approaches. The regional reports, therefore, point toward the need for integrated, rights-based, and forward-looking policy frameworks capable of addressing both immediate needs and the structural conditions that produce exclusion and insecurity.

The findings also reaffirm the enduring importance of social policy as a cornerstone of sustainable development. Far from being a residual mechanism for responding to social distress, social policy is increasingly recognised as a strategic instrument for promoting social cohesion, strengthening democratic legitimacy, advancing human rights, and building resilience in the face of uncertainty. Across regions, there is growing recognition that investments in social protection, healthcare, education, housing, care systems, decent work, and community development are not merely social expenditures but essential foundations for inclusive and sustainable societies.

The reports further underscore the critical role of universal, adaptive, and lifecycle-based social protection systems in responding to contemporary risks. Whether confronting economic shocks, climate-related disasters, displacement, demographic transitions, or public health emergencies, societies with stronger, more inclusive social protection systems are better positioned to safeguard human well-being and maintain social stability. Expanding social protection to the vulnerable and excluded groups, therefore, remains one of the most urgent and transformative priorities identified across the regions.

Another consistent theme concerns the importance of cooperation and shared responsibility. The challenges highlighted throughout the report increasingly transcend national borders and institutional mandates. Effective responses require collaboration among governments, civil society organisations, international organisations, academia, professional bodies, and the private sector. The regional reports demonstrate that meaningful progress depends not only on technical solutions and financial resources but also on solidarity, trust, participation, and collective action. Strengthening mechanisms for regional cooperation, knowledge exchange, and multilateral engagement will therefore be essential in addressing shared global challenges and advancing common social goals.

The report also highlights the indispensable contribution of social workers and social development practitioners in translating policy commitments into meaningful change. Operating at the intersection of public institutions and everyday lived realities, these professionals play vital roles in strengthening social inclusion, facilitating dialogue, supporting vulnerable populations, building community resilience, and informing policy development. As social risks become more complex and interconnected, their contribution to social welfare systems, social protection delivery, and community development becomes increasingly important. Investment in the social service workforce, professional education, and supportive working environments should therefore be recognised as a strategic component of sustainable social development.

Climate change and ecological degradation emerge throughout the regional reports as defining challenges of the present century. The evidence demonstrates that environmental risks are inseparable from social risks, affecting livelihoods, health, food security, displacement patterns, and social cohesion. Responding effectively requires integrated approaches that link climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction, environmental sustainability, and social protection. Equally important is ensuring that ecological transitions are socially just and do not deepen existing inequalities or exclusions, particularly since environmental harms and environmental interventions often affect vulnerable populations disproportionately (Shajahan & Sharma, 2018)

At the same time, the reports caution against growing threats to social cohesion and democratic governance. Rising polarisation, declining institutional trust, shrinking civic space, misinformation, and unequal access to opportunities pose significant impediments for collective responses to shared challenges. Strengthening participation, protecting civic engagement, promoting inclusive governance, and rebuilding trust between citizens and institutions are therefore not peripheral concerns but essential conditions for sustainable development and social stability.

Looking ahead, the regional reports collectively point toward a broad agenda for action. This agenda includes strengthening universal social protection systems, promoting decent work, and nurturing inclusive economies. It also advocates for investing in care systems and human capabilities, enhancing climate resilience, improving data systems, and evidence-informed policymaking. Such an inclusive project can thrive in an environment that protects civic space and fosters cooperation at local, national, regional, and global levels. While priorities and pathways will necessarily differ across contexts, the underlying principles of social justice, human dignity, inclusion, participation, and solidarity remain universally relevant.

This report also highlights that the accelerating digitalisation of society and the rapid adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) are transforming public institutions, education, employment, and social relationships. While these technologies offer significant opportunities to enhance service delivery and social inclusion, they also create new forms of inequality and digital vulnerability, particularly among children and young people who are increasingly exposed to excessive screen time, online exploitation, misinformation, cyberbullying, and AI-driven manipulation. Addressing these emerging risks requires strengthening digital literacy, ethical AI governance, mental health support, and inclusive social policies to ensure that technological progress advances human well-being, protects rights, and leaves no one behind (López Peláez, A., Marcuello-Servós, 2026).

Ultimately, this Global Situation Report suggests that the future of social development will depend on societies' capacity to move beyond fragmented responses toward more integrated and collaborative approaches. The challenges of the twenty-first century demand renewed commitments to collective responsibility, inclusive governance, and human-centred development. In an increasingly interdependent world, social welfare systems, social protection institutions, and community-based responses are not only mechanisms of support but essential pillars of resilience, stability, and sustainable progress.

The regional reports, therefore, offer both a warning and a source of hope. They highlight the profound challenges confronting societies today, but they also demonstrate the existence of knowledge, experience, professional commitment, and collective capacity upon which a more inclusive and sustainable future can be built. The task ahead is not merely to respond to crises as they arise, but to strengthen the social foundations that enable individuals, communities, and societies to thrive in the face of uncertainty and change.

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