

News and views ... from ICSW

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Why have the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) embarked on the ambitious project to build a new social agenda?

Civil society has been the originator of policies and programmes for hundreds of years. Governments take over when programmes become too big for civil society to manage and finance. The global financial and food crises have long-term consequences for the poor of the world. It is in this context that civil society needs to develop a new vision, a new agenda for social policy and social development. The Social Protection Floor Initiative (See *International Social Work* issue 53/6) is a rational and helpful response to the problems caused by the global crises. Even the World Bank and International Monetary Fund are emerging from the mistaken belief that the market is the solution to poverty.

Governments of the world have lost the urge they had in the 1990s to create social reform. You may remember the three great meetings of governments and civil society in 1995 and 2002. In these three meetings (outlined below) governments worked with civil society to produce new agendas in social development, women's issues and ageing. It is obvious that in the last decade governments have been reluctant to enter into dialogue with civil society in international forums. At national level we are witnessing a toughening attitude to civil society with regulatory frameworks limiting the activities and interaction of civil society with governments and parliaments. There is increasing scrutiny of civil society activities and accountability. At the UN level we have seen limits placed by member governments on the voice of civil society.

It is in this context that we need to look at the achievements of previous summits and recreate a new vision, a new *Agenda*. But first let us reflect on the three major summits.

The World Summit for Social Development was held in March 1995 in Copenhagen. Governments reached a new consensus on the need to put people at the centre of development. At that time the Social Summit was the largest ever gathering of world leaders. It pledged to make the conquest of

poverty, the goal of full employment and the fostering of social integration the overriding objectives of development. Five years later, in June 2000, governments reconvened in Geneva to review what had been achieved and to commit themselves to new initiatives. This resulted in the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals which were a cut-down version or an abbreviation of the Copenhagen commitments.

In September 1995 the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing and was attended by 89 governments and more than 5,000 representatives from 2,100 non-governmental organizations. The conference produced the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Platform for Action sets out a number of actions that were meant to lead to fundamental changes by the year 2000 – the Five Year Review of the Beijing Conference at a Special Session of the UN General Assembly (Beijing +5).

The Second World Assembly on Ageing was held in Madrid in 2002 and resulted in the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing.

Since the three world meetings to develop social plans there has been a dearth of events in the social development sphere where governments interact with civil society.

The UN Commission for Social Development is the key UN body responsible for the follow-up and implementation of the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action. But this is done in a low-key way with low-level involvement from most governments.

In 2010 IASSSW, ICSW and IFSW decided that we must jointly build a new social agenda which we are calling *The Agenda*. The process was launched at the joint world conference held in Hong Kong in June 2010. Later in 2010 members of the three organizations were asked to comment on the draft Agenda. The responses exhibited a high level of support in principle for the structure of *The Agenda* and the strategy and actions proposed. There were general and specific proposals for major or minor changes including: making explicit the link between human rights, ethics and values and *The Agenda*; giving more prominence to human health; recognizing equalities and disadvantaged groups; linking macro and micro actions – should we find a way to make *The Agenda* more clearly linked to practice? In response, *The Agenda* was revised in a process coordinated by IFSW Past President Dr David Jones. This revised version of *The Agenda* was distributed in February 2011 in time for the next stage of consultation focused on World Social Work Day on 15 March 2011.

The three organizations met in January 2010 in London to discuss continuing work on *The Agenda*. The major discussion focussed on strengthening the link between *The Agenda* and the 2012 joint world conference in Stockholm. Already, linkages with the conference are substantial. The

conference organizers are taking the 2010 initiative further by addressing and demonstrating the actions that might be required to develop and achieve *The Agenda*. This will be done in the context of social work practice, research, social policy and social work education.

The three primary themes of the conference are first, human rights and social equality, second, environmental change and sustainable social development and third global social transformation and social action.

Within these three themes there will be a wealth of discussion that will add to *The Agenda*. Conference themes that will add to *The Agenda* include: active and dignified ageing; disability and the struggle for inclusion; respecting spiritual rights and religious beliefs; responding to violence against women; respecting gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights; protecting children at risk; promoting the right to health and social equality; disaster management from the perspective of social work and social development; indigenous understanding of environmental change; integrating economic and social perspectives of environment; social action for clean water; environmental social work – education and practice; fighting poverty and developing social protection; social work in the context of political and military conflicts; migration; families in transition; the work of international NGOs in transnational social action; social media and its impact on social development. The conference website is live and worth visiting to see new material as it is added.

The process we have undertaken is ambitious but we are driven by the reality that by working together we can make a difference to the decisions on social development made by international organizations and national governments.

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