

# Social Work and Youth:

## TOWARDS INCLUSIVE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Constituting over 1.8 billion persons around the world, young people are key agents of change with the potential to push the world towards a better tomorrow. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents a global vision for a sustainable future that will not be achieved without the active participation and inclusion of youth. Young people around the world nevertheless face multiple structural, socioeconomic, political and interpersonal challenges and insecurities which give rise to multiple vulnerabilities and potential risk behavior. The 2018 edition of Work Social Work Day at the United Nations in Geneva considered ways to strengthen young people's potential to contribute to sustainable development, and inclusive societies and communities. Pathways were identified to help youth overcome the challenges they face so that every young person can live a fulfilling and dignified life.

World Social Work Day at the UN in Geneva put the role of social work in supporting young people to engage with sustainable development in the spotlight. Celebrated with more than 140 participants at the Palais des Nations on 20-21 March 2018, the event brought together social work students and practitioners; academics; policy makers; activists; representatives from NGOs, international organizations and UN agencies; and members from permanent missions in Geneva.

### Collective efforts for engaging youth towards sustainable development

In his opening remarks, UNOG Director General Michael Møller emphasized the importance of active youth participation in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. He noted that youth around the world put forceful claims on business and state leaders regarding more ethical and sustainable economic and political practices, while they also face great challenges. Youth unemployment rates exceeding those of adults three-fold, declining prospects of being better off than one's parents' generation, and increasing job insecurity are drivers of a growing disenchantment of youth over the failures of our system. A deeper connection between global and local efforts—between the United Nations, policy makers, social workers and other practitioners, activists and researchers—is required to address these interconnected challenges and make the 2030 Agenda a reality. These remarks were echoed by Joëlle Libois, Paul Ladd, Nino Zganec and Ana Radulescu, who also highlighted the importance of strengthening and rethinking the social work profession as social action based on rights and social justice in order to contribute to sustainable development.

### Sustainable development and youth: The role of social work

As key actors engaging with youth, social workers have a central role to play in addressing multiple layers of marginalization and vulnerability, and in creating spaces and support for youth to build and harness their potential and develop their agency. During keynote presentations, expert panels, interactive workshops, and a UN-practitioner roundtable, speakers and participants explored the contemporary challenges youth face and how social work values and tools, in partnership with multiple actors such as public services, international organizations and NGOs, can help youth to thrive and contribute meaningfully to their communities and societies at the local, national and global levels. Presenters and participants also raised a range of critical issues and concerns regarding the self-understanding of social work, and its reduction to a role of dealing with the casualties of unsustainable practices instead of transforming them; the multiple obstacles youth face towards inclusion; different understandings of youth agency and meaningful participation; as well as activism, mobilization and political strategies that could result in transformative outcomes.

Starting with the provocative question "Inclusion into what?", keynote speaker Aila-Leena Matthies argued that (re-)inserting young people into labour markets as a means to ensure inclusion is not sufficient, considering the unsustainability of our current economic production and consumption models. She suggested that a radical transition towards youth inclusion respectful of ecological limits and social values is needed, which also requires a critical reflection of current social work practices which have moved away from a previous emancipatory and



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collective approach towards a focus on individual adaptation to the existing environment, even if this perpetuates unsustainable lifestyles and production systems. New sustainability approaches to youth inclusion could, on the contrary, focus on eco-social innovations and activities that promote well-being, care for the natural environment, the circular and sharing economy, or culture. Examples from Europe illustrate how inclusion and youth participation in sustainable development can be redefined in a more transformative way.

Several of these ideas were reflected in the expert panel on “Promoting youth inclusion for sustainable and resilient communities”. François Gillet presented a number of innovative projects run by young people in Europe with the objective of creating more sustainable and inclusive communities, such as self-built housing and co-working arrangements.

The focus of the presentation by Sandrine Haymoz, Patrik Manzoni and Dirk Baier was on political extremism among youth in Switzerland—from right-wing to left-wing to Islamist movements—the first study of its kind in the country. Extremist attitudes and behaviours among youth, defined in broad terms by the research group as a rejection of democracy and the acceptance or use of violence as means of political action in view of changing the political system—although generally on the decline in recent years—put young people and their communities at risk, threatening social cohesion and inclusion. While results are preliminary and policy implications still to develop, some correlation of risk factors appeared in the survey, as extremist-inclined youth were more often male than female, while also featuring lower self-control, weak attachment to their school environment, and higher delinquency rates than other survey respondents. Socioeconomic factors such as a migratory background, non-traditional family patterns, parental unemployment, substance consumption and experience of discrimination also played a role for different types of extremism.

The challenge of youth unemployment was analysed by Niall O’Higgins, who presented the latest ILO data on the impact of demographic and technological changes on youth employment. While youth unemployment globally has been relatively stable since 2005 at around 12.9 percent (2018), regional differences and variations over time exist, with Arab States and Northern Africa displaying the highest rates and female unemployment reaching nearly twice that of already high male rates (21 vs. 41 percent; 26.5 vs. 37.7 percent). Women are also disproportionately affected by exclusion from employment and education, with three-quarters of global NEETs (young people neither in employment nor education) being women. Youth are more affected by working poverty and informal employment, and while wage employment among young workers rose between 2005 and 2015, much of it was on temporary contracts, especially in developing countries, where they increased by 120 percent.

The presentation by Dina Kiwan focused on different conceptions of youth and activism, exemplified by experiences from youth movements in Lebanon. The country’s history of armed conflict, poverty and inequality, large refugee populations and multiple sectarian divides, and high youth unemployment rates and political alienation are contrasted by a vibrant youth civil society. Recently, Lebanese youth have engaged in protest around waste management, against domestic violence and for access to green public spaces open to all. Dina Kiwan unpacked different conceptions of youth, from instrumental (youth as development actors) to vulnerable (youth as excluded), and of activism. She recommended moving beyond age-defined conceptions of youth behaviour; including social norms and socio-political contexts to problematize vulnerability; recognizing artistic expression and agency; and acknowledging different types of activism—from illiberal to progressive—with anti-politics being one form.

Mark Goodale presented an analysis of indigenous youth as actors for more inclusive societies. He joined Kiwan in his observation that youth conceptions are culturally determined, with different cultures producing different youths, and change over time. Looking at indigenous youth in Bolivia, where the government led by indigenous president Evo Morales introduced a new constitution based on plurinationalism, he noted tensions between inclusion and exclusion, and between cultural and universalistic approaches to youth engagement. Goodale concluded that social work as a practice of social transformation means moving away from “clinical” understandings of social work to bring the “social” back, and that the task of youth engagement is ultimately the work of youth themselves.

These four key themes were carried through the interactive workshops, where they were more strongly linked to social work practice and participation practices.

## Interactive workshops

### ● Youth and marginalized minorities

What are the specific challenges faced by young people from marginalized ethnic and cultural minorities? What are their claims and how do they mobilize? How do social policies respond to them, or, on the contrary, reinforce marginalization processes? These were some questions the workshop aimed to address with examples from Sami people in Norway and various ethnic minorities in Southern and Central America.

One key observation to emerge from this workshop was that success in terms of inclusion of minorities can result in less institutional protection, and that access to political power is a prime determinant for achieving progressive results. Another important point was that legislative measures aimed at recognition of specific rights and statuses of minority groups have disadvantages, such as opening up competition between claims, introducing a hierarchy of norms and re-legitimizing state-based visions of territory and culture.

### ● **Youth and extremism**

Extremism, whether based on religious radicalization or other ideologies, is often associated with youth. How can social work prevent this phenomenon and fight this form of co-optation and abuse of young people by radical and terrorist groups, without inciting moral panic and stigmatization? The workshop addressed issues of Islamic extremism—and more specifically the role of women in jihad—as well as issues of right-wing and left-wing extremism. Researchers presented innovative approaches to prevention, such as the creation of counter-narratives and alternative narratives by young people. The aim social workers pursue in prevention work is to train youth to create such narratives which can be used in online prevention tools against radicalization. In this way, young people are both actors of prevention and of integration. Schools are equally important in training a critical mind, management of emotions and frustration, as well as self-control of children and youth.

### ● **Group work as a method for labour market integration**

In high-income countries, young people from populations marginalized by lack of legal status or other mechanisms are often confronted with exclusion in school or the world of work. In cooperation with local and international partners, the School of Social Work Lucerne has developed a group coaching approach for marginalized groups, which was presented during the workshop. Presenters shared the experience of applying the approach with a group of young Roma in Albania suffering marginalization and exclusion. The project, which aims to support labour market insertion of young Roma through internships, education and capacity building, shows that participatory processes need time and space for meetings and discussions in order to deconstruct stereotypes and build confidence among participants and self-awareness of their capacities.

### ● **Mobilizing youth for transformative change**

How can young people from all backgrounds meaningfully engage and become agents of change to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? How can their creative potential be tapped for building resilient communities? How can social work professionals and international organizations promote youth participation and develop their political participation at all levels, from local to global? This interactive workshop used innovative “World Café” methodology, a mixture of self-work and group discussions, to identify individual interests, strengths and values, and brainstorming about social issues in each participant’s community, their potential causes and solutions, and concrete personal contributions to address them. Issues ranged from supporting small businesses and handicrafts, and creating lively and diverse neighbourhoods, to affordable and sustainable housing, migrant integration, social cohesion and citizen participation, sustainable waste management, and sustainable urban food systems. Participants identified both educational institutions and public services as important spaces to develop the motivation to act for change, but they

also emphasized each individual’s responsibility for personal engagement, solidarity and social commitment. Several student participants argued these are more easily achieved through NGOs or grassroots initiatives compared to joining political institutions or parties in their locality.

### 🕒 **Key takeaways**

Reporting back to the plenary after the interactive workshops prompted a number of observations regarding concepts, case studies and methodologies from the workshops. Youth radicalization, according to one participant, could also be interpreted as a reaction to extremism, or could stem from a desire for adventure or to stand out vis-à-vis peers. Regarding protection and promotion of minorities, the concern was raised that all people have intersecting identities and reducing a person to one identity, through legal measures or public policies, instead of seeing them in their globality, could be reductionist and dangerous. Another participant saw in the focus on individual rights a neglect of collective concerns and solidarity to care for others. Social work was accused at times of representing the system; promoting labour market integration, for example, could channel market pressures towards youth, who might not be prepared to take these on. Methodologies presented and applied during various workshops were considered useful tools by several participants both for their present or future social work practice and personally.

### ○ **Multistakeholder roundtable**

WSWD 2018 in Geneva ended with a roundtable bringing together representatives from UNICEF, OHCHR, the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, the City of Geneva, and the government of Sierra Leone, as well as a young social worker and activist.

Ambassador Yvette Stevens presented several important government initiatives in her country aimed at including a very youthful population (75 percent are under the age of 36) in political decision making, public services and labour markets. Sierra Leone, with a violent history of civil war and child soldiers, has created several forums to listen to youth voices, engaged in youth development plans, and instituted a Ministry of Youth Affairs along with youth councils at the district level. The challenges are daunting, especially that of overcoming high youth unemployment in an economy that is driven by agricultural and fishery sectors, while young people migrate to urban centres.

Sergio Mimouni, from the Department of Social Cohesion and Solidarity of the City of Geneva, talked about the multiple services and initiatives targeting children and youth, from early childhood care and education to youth and family support services and socio-cultural activities and meeting spaces, such as the Geneva Neighbourhood Centers (*Maisons de quartier*). Young people in Geneva are invited to participate in projects and to benefit from labour market insertion and capacity building programmes.

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Rio Hada from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights mentioned important human rights frameworks, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which promotes and safeguards the rights of children and youth. He also noted that although youth are often affected by problems and precarious situations, they are largely absent from political processes and increasingly distrustful of the political system. A future vision in line with the SDGs would be that young people take ownership and engage; sustainable development is not *for* but *with* young people, and with youth educators and social workers.

Getou Musangu, a young Afroswiss social worker and anti-racism activist, emphasized the need to raise awareness about racism in public space and daily life, for example racist stereotypes in commercial advertising, and to use social work to make racism visible and work to combat it. Different tools exist in this sense, for example school workshops, alternative cinema, and awareness-raising campaigns such as Geneva's Week against Racism (*Semaine contre le racisme*). More work needs to be done and more funds need to be channeled into initiatives and institutions that seek to overcome deep-seated prejudices and stereotypes about people of colour and migrants.

Natia Partskhaladze from the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance spoke about violence against children and young people as a key obstacle to achieving their full potential in the context of the SDGs. She highlighted the role of social work in preventing and responding to violence, presenting best practices and specific individual, community and societal level interventions applied by social workers, as outlined in the *State of the Social Service Workforce 2017 Report* produced by the Alliance. Empowering, facilitating social inclusion and otherwise supporting the most vulnerable young people throughout the world requires a well-developed and well-supported workforce. She further described the types of support that the Alliance finds most helpful in overcoming multiple challenges in social work practice. Concretely, this means implementing strategic and data-driven planning tools which are linked with innovative approaches to education and training of social workers, as well as

Nina Ferencic from UNICEF focused on the topic of youth participation by distinguishing between adult-driven consultations, collaborative approaches, and youth-led or co-created approaches. Challenges towards participation arise from legal obstacles (for example when minimum ages are required), capacities of parents, and lack of available spaces for youth engagement, for example. Participation needs to go hand in hand with protection, whether it happens through digital platforms, in the family or school.

WSWD 2018 put young people and their potential to contribute to more sustainable futures in the spotlight. Transformative approaches to social work policy and practice are crucial to make this vision a reality. The discussions and workshops during WSWD 2018 contributed to a better understanding of the multiple challenges youth is facing, while also highlighting the many seeds of eco-social transformations that are planted in our societies through the active involvement and creativity of young persons.

#### World Social Work Day

Introduced in 1983 at the UN headquarters in New York by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), later joined by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), World Social Work Day is celebrated around the world through collaborative initiatives with national and local social work organizations.

In line with the *Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development*, WSWD at the UN aims to connect social work to global debates, build and strengthen partnerships between social workers and the international community, increase the visibility of social work and its principles and practices, and foster its contribution to the global endeavor of sustainable development in all countries and for all peoples.

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