



“Promoting Community and Environmental Sustainability” Social Work and Sustainable Development –21&22 March 2017

“Social Work and Sustainability” was the theme of the 2017 World Social Work Day conference held March 21 & 22 at the Palais des Nations, United Nations Office at Geneva, Switzerland. This now annual event is organized by the IASSW and the IFSW in collaboration with United Nations agencies and with the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland – Social Work, Geneva (HETS). This year, UNRISD (UN Research Institute for Social Development) was an active partner in an event that also featured participation by experts from the International Labour Organization, UNAIDS, UN High Commission for Refugees, and the UN High Commission on Human rights. An opening roundtable of these experts and Paul Ladd, Director of UNRISD was moderated by Klaus Kuhne, IFSW’s Main representative to the UN in Geneva.

The themes of environment and sustainability permeate the UN’s 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals. They are also one of 4 main themes of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, creating a perfect fit for this year’s program. Speakers challenged the audience to consider the following: What can social work contribute and which competences are needed to implement the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? Lena Dominelli (Durham University, UK and former IASSW President), a renowned expert on environment and social work, gave the keynote address at the conference: “Green social work, environmental justice and the global agenda.” In her work, Dominelli emphasizes the human impact of climate change and environmental disasters and the roles that social work needs to play in prevention, mitigation and sustainable development.

A panel of academicians and IO and NGOs representatives concluded the event with concrete examples of the challenge of sustainable development for social work in various contexts such as Cambodia, Togo, Armenia, Geneva, about subtopics such as: protecting children from violence and reaching the most vulnerable; socio-economic transformation that implies new forms of vulnerability; Agricultural production in urban areas, etc.

It is increasingly clear that social work must include more emphasis on the physical environment in its conception of the environmental emphasis of professional intervention. The 2017 Geneva event was an important step in this direction. There is much work remaining for our social work organizations on this topic. For IASSW, continuing effort is needed to address the challenges to integrating sustainability into social work curricula.