

Opening remarks on the occasion of World Social Work Day

Helen Clark Administrator United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

26 March 2012 UN, New York

Many thanks for the traditional New Zealand welcome to me today. I am pleased, in turn, to welcome all present here for the 29th Annual Social Work Day at the United Nations.

It is an honour for me to accept the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development on behalf of the UN, and to congratulate the International Federation of Social Workers, the International Association of Schools of Social Work, and the International Council on Social Welfare on developing the Agenda.

I understand that the Global Agenda was adopted with the overwhelming support of delegates to the joint conference of your three organisations in Hong Kong. That suggests that there is a widely shared and clear vision across the international social worker community, which gives the Global Agenda great credibility.

Across the United Nations, our organisations work to eradicate poverty, promote human rights, and advance sustainable development. The Global Agenda's vision mirrors many of the goals, rights, and agreements established by the United Nations – and the mandates of our agencies, funds, and programmes.

We too are pledged to address the root causes of poverty, oppression, and inequality. We support the call in the Global Agenda “to create a more socially-just and fair world which we will be proud to leave to future generations”

Co-operation between those who share these objectives is vital in overcoming the complex challenges which beset our world. Financial and economic crises, high food and fuel prices, major natural disasters, and armed violence and conflict have a large and detrimental impact on human development.

We need to build broad coalitions within countries and across national boundaries to promote solutions to these challenges. Some of them can be addressed at the national level. Others require global action, as the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development recognizes.

For more than a century, the social work profession has been at the forefront of promoting human rights and supporting people to realize their full potential. Various arms of the United Nations have worked with your organisations in global fora, and alongside social workers in-country to advance progress on the Millennium Development Goals, engage citizens in development, and strengthen social protection systems.

Let me speak briefly to the commitments made in the Global Agenda – on each of which there is scope for enhanced partnerships between social workers and the United Nations.

1. Promotion of Social and Economic Equalities

2015 is the date set for achieving many of the targets in the Millennium Development Goals. The world is within reach of seeing every child enrolled in primary school, and many fewer lives are being lost to poverty, hunger, and disease. The World Bank estimates that the target of reducing the numbers of people living in extreme poverty by half has already been achieved.

Yet a number of inconvenient truths must also be confronted. Many of the seven billion people on our planet live in highly unequal societies where extreme poverty persists and where ecosystems are severely degraded.

Economic and human development progress simply cannot be sustained where gross inequities leave societies unstable and lacking cohesion – and where the ecosystems on which life depends are badly damaged.

An explicit focus on equity and environmental sustainability is needed to accelerate progress on the MDGs and advance sustainable human development for all.

For that, we need approaches which foster the fullest participation of people, along with ‘bottom up’ advocacy which bring the needs of the poor and marginalized to the attention of governments. Real life understanding of the day-to-day challenges which poor people face needs to inform and shape national development strategies. Social work professionals play an important role in making these connections. Your actions make a difference where it matters most, and your voices provide direction for policies and programmes.

In Colombia and Costa Rica, for example, social work practitioners have been involved in helping to shape national and local MDG acceleration plans, working with the UN and national partners. These are two of a growing number of countries employing the MDG Acceleration Framework to speed up progress towards MDG targets. The Framework is a tool developed by UNDP which uses multi-stakeholder engagement to identify barriers to progress and the solutions which can overcome them.

The success of this approach derives from the broad engagement on which it is based – ensuring support for action plans shaped by practitioners with local know-how and with evidence of what works.

In Colombia, the Framework was applied to address the wide disparities in MDG achievement. Social work practitioners worked with local governments to design actions which took into account the perspectives of communities and targeted those most in need. Social workers are now helping to implement the local action plans, with the aim of reducing disparities within the participating local authority territories.

In Costa Rica, the local knowledge of social workers is helping shape a national MDG acceleration plan aimed at increasing employment for people living with disabilities.

As indicated in the Global Agenda, social workers can help build and strengthen interaction between governments and their citizens, bring the concerns of the vulnerable to the fore, and help local authorities to be more responsive to citizens and accountable for the services they deliver.

UNDP, through the MDG Acceleration Framework and its support for civil society engagement, can be a partner in these efforts. Collaboration between UNDP and your organisations through the Platform Human Development initiative exemplifies this potential. I understand the initiative has, in the last few years, helped to facilitate civil society engagement in the national development strategies of Mozambique, Senegal, Philippines and Nepal.

I have asked UN Resident Co-ordinators around the world to work on establishing Civil Society Advisory Committees wherever possible. These Committees advise UN Country Teams on local and national

development issues, and identify ways to improve civic participation and engagement. Organisations engaged in social work are already engaged in some of them. Their experience is helpful in guiding our work on how to reach marginalised groups and communities, and make social protection systems and service delivery more effective.

While we strive together to support achieving the MDG targets by 2015, the global conversation has already begun on what the development agenda will look like beyond that date.

The preparations for Rio +20, the summit itself, and the large civil society and other events which will run alongside it are an important part of that conversation.

It is important that voices from across the world's communities are heard at Rio +20, and that there is an outcome from the summit which weaves the three strands of sustainable development together. The Global Agenda developed by your organisations makes it clear that you will be actively engaged in these global discussions. I have no doubt that you will help ensure that the perspectives of the world's poorest and most marginalised communities are heard.

2. Promoting the dignity and worth of peoples

I applaud the commitment in the Global Agenda to promote the dignity and worth of peoples.

- You seek universal implementation of international conventions and instruments.
- You support strategies which will drive social cohesion and address the seeds of conflict.
- You seek peaceful resolutions of conflict.
- You advocate for the rights of migrants.
- You will support action against human trafficking.

The United Nations highly values partners like you who share its norms and values, and seek to uphold the substantial body of human rights law which has been developed.

A role of UN Country Teams around the world is to support countries to translate global norms and standards into national policy and practice. UNDP works in a great many countries to help establish independent national human rights commissions and build the effectiveness of those which already exist. A survey of our Country Offices in 2008 also revealed that more than a third of them were helping to harmonise national legislation with international human rights instruments.

3. Working toward environmental sustainability

Sustaining human development progress is about meeting the needs of people today without compromising the prospects of future generations.

Last year the global Human Development Report published by UNDP argued that equity and environmental sustainability must be advanced together to maintain progress on human development. In our work we look for "triple win" policies which reduce poverty and inequality and are good for the environment.

Energy policy provides rich opportunities for triple wins. Access to sustainable energy for all lifts incomes, has huge social benefits, and is kind to the environment. 2012 has been designated by the UN General Assembly as the International Year of Sustainable Energy Access for All, and the Secretary General has announced an initiative with ambitious targets to that end. We hope that this cause will gain momentum at Rio +20.

Social and community workers see the hardship which living without modern energy brings:

- the burden on women and children
- the poor health which comes from being exposed to unclean cooking stoves, and
- the impact on local vegetation when people have no option but to use traditional biomass for cooking and heating.

Social and community workers' advocacy for both equity and environmental sustainability can bring powerful testimony from the grassroots. UNDP is supporting more than seventy countries to hold broadly-based consultations in the lead-up to Rio, and I hope your voices will be heard.

4. Strengthening recognition of the importance of human relationships

Finally, and briefly, at UNDP we share your commitment to promoting sustainable interdependent communities to achieve social development and well-being.

We, like you, base our work on empowering individuals and communities. At the heart of the concept of human development is an acknowledgement of the importance of people being able to live lives which they choose and value. At the heart of our work is engaging communities in voicing what they want their future to look like.

I have just seen an inspirational example of such work in Haiti, where UNDP has helped create community platforms in informal settlements. People are coming together to work on how to make their districts more resilient to natural disasters, and they will make their voices heard by decision-makers.

In conclusion, I thank you for celebrating Social Work Day at the United Nations. By coming here each year, you remind us of the vital role the social work profession plays in building a more equitable and sustainable world. This year, the formal presentation of your Global Agenda also reminds us of the shared vision and values we have, and of the importance of working together for a better world.