

## **Progress in global social work at successful Melbourne SWSD2014 conference**

### **by Trudi Marchant VP WA Branch**

Significant progress on the global agenda for social work was made during the recent international SWSD2014 Conference 'Promoting Social and Economic Equality: Responses from social work and social development'. The conference was a great success with 1500 delegates from around the world converging on Melbourne for four action packed days from 9th - 12th July. This was the third Joint World Conference sponsored by the three major international social work and social development agencies, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW). The conference delivered on an ambitious program including the first report on the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, and an impressive array of keynote speakers, plenary sessions, symposiums, presentations, e-posters, field visits and networking opportunities. All areas of interest were catered for around six major themes: Strengthening social and cultural wellbeing, Addressing health inequalities, Educating for change and equality, Fostering social and economic initiatives, Creating sustainable and safe physical environments and Sustainable and ethical use of technology. A number of exciting media developments at this conference were the presence of the Guardian syndicating stories from the conference through their growing number of international media outlets and the use of the conference twitter handle by delegates and organisations to get their messages out through social media.

The first report on the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, a joint strategy by the three partner agencies to address global poverty, inequality and oppression, focused on 'Promoting social and economic equalities'. This is the first of four Agenda priorities and provides a baseline of information from five global regions to assist the agencies in undertaking credible and professional advocacy with regional and global bodies. The report can be found at [www.isw.sagepub.com/](http://www.isw.sagepub.com/) while a copy of the Global Agenda can be found at [www.globalsocialagenda.org](http://www.globalsocialagenda.org) and a special issue of International Social Work (57(4)) devoted to debating the issues can also be found at [www.isw.sagepub.com/](http://www.isw.sagepub.com/).

The broader conference provided opportunities for delegates to hear of the latest developments across the profession from all corners of the globe. The plenaries provided thoughtful and challenging discussions of the issues at the forefront of research, practice and action. A sample of those I attended included Professor Margaret Alston from Monash describing her research on social work's response to social and gendered impacts of climate and environmental disaster events from her initial work on the impact of the drought in the Murray Darling basin to researching similar climate impacts in India and Bangladesh and planned future work in Laos. Professor In Young Han from Ewha Woman's University, South Korea outlined the rise of social work in South Korea and her areas of interest including work with refugee's from North Korea and a reminder of the need for international action to end the continuing appalling human rights abuses in that country. Finally the diminutive Professor Visanthie Sewpal from the University of KwaZulu South Africa, in a typical lively presentation, delivered the Eileen Younghusband Lecuture, a moving tribute to Nelson Mandela and the personal and professional lessons for social work in grappling with the realities of tackling discrimination and oppression.

The AASW's concern to progress aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work shone throughout the conference. The haunting sole didgeridoo player opening the conference followed by the heart-warming Welcome to Country by Uncle Tom, an elder of the local Wurundjeri and the hip hop routine by young indigenous dancers set the tone for the conference while the grounded, incisive and salutary comments on indigenous practice from four ATSI practitioners and leaders during the well-attended indigenous plenary, highlighted the continuing need to place indigenous policy and practice at the heart of the Australian social work enterprise.

The Symposia provided the opportunity for leaders and delegates to discuss and debate contemporary developments in areas ranging from disability, refugees, child protection and health inequalities to statutory regulation and the evolution of the international definition of social work. Again sessions were stimulating and interesting.

The 700 individual presentations, whilst frustratingly fleeting ten minute tasters of the fabulous work being done around the world, at least canvassed the breadth, detail and complexity of the profession and provided an opportunity for follow up with the author and abstract. All abstracts are available on the SWSD2014 website. In my own area of 'Emerging Social Work', it was gratifying to see research and consensus beginning to emerge confirming the professional values we all share despite enormous international diversity. Of particular note was the development of social work in Indonesia following legislation establishing the profession in 2009. This will hopefully create opportunities for Australian social work to build bridges to Indonesia beyond the usual tourist routes.

Finally for once Australia was able to put its wealthy nation status to good effect and deliver a wonderful conference. The Melbourne Exhibition Centre provided a bright and spacious venue overlooking the Yarra, comfortably accommodating all sessions and enabling delegates to meet and greet with old and new colleagues alike in the welcoming public areas. The AASW can be rightfully proud of sponsoring such a vibrant and well organised international conference and congratulations must go to the organising committees for such an enormous amount of dedication and hard work. Special mention must be made of AASW President Karen Healy for her leadership in supporting the conference from its inception and Marie Connelly and Lou Harms from Melbourne University, Chairs of the local organising and program committees respectively, for making it happen. It is difficult to cover all of the action from such a great conference here and I urge all interested members to go to the SWSD2014 website to discover the breadth and depth of topics covered. And for those motivated by the opportunity to participate in such a historic event in a fellow member country of the Asia Pacific region, start planning for the next conference in South Korea in 2016.