

# INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK: THINK GLOBAL. ACT LOCAL. BE SOCIAL.

*Medzinárodná sociálna práca: Mysli globálne. Konaj lokálne. Bud' sociálny.*

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## ABSTRAKT

Nakoll'ko sociálni pracovníci reagujú na lokálne kontexty, sociálna práca nebýva vnímaná ako globálne povolanie. Sociálni pracovníci skutočne prispôbujú svoje postupy lokálnym podmienkam. Tieto lokálne postupy sú však uznávané globálne. Zdieľanie a výmena týchto postupov a metód obohacuje sociálnych pracovníkov, inšpiruje ich a posilňuje ďalší rozvoj profesie. Na uľahčenie takejto výmeny skúseností má sociálna práca už takmer storočie niekoľko medzinárodných združení a sietí, ktoré umožňujú zdieľanie lokálnych postupov a vzdelávacích programov. V súčasnosti sociálna práca pracuje v základnom medzinárodnom rámci, ktorý riadi profesionálnu prax aj vzdelávanie. Tento deskriptívny príspevok prevedie čitateľa históriou medzinárodnej sociálnej práce a spomenie niektoré globálne združenia a siete sociálnej práce a ich úspechy. Text sa ďalej bude zaoberať internacionalizáciou učebných osnov sociálnej práce vrátane pridanej hodnoty a/alebo nevýhod medzinárodnej skúsenosti v zahraničí.

**Kľúčové slová:** Sociálna práca. Medzinárodná sociálna práca.

## ABSTRACT

Because social workers respond to local contexts, it is often said that social work is not a global profession. Indeed, social workers adapt their practices to local conditions. However, these local practices are recognised globally. The exchange of these practices and methods enriches social workers, inspires them and strengthens the further development of the profession. To facilitate this exchange, social work has had several international associations and networks for almost a century, which have enabled the sharing of local practices and educational programs. Today, social work works within a basic international framework that guides both professional practice and education. This descriptive article will take the reader through the history of international social work, by mentioning some global social work associations and networks and their achievements. Furthermore, the article will address internationalisation of the social work curriculum and will mention the added values and disadvantages of an international experience abroad.

**Key words:** Social work. International social work.

## INTRODUCTION

The relevance of internationalisation to the social work profession is frequently questioned, with the argument that routine professional tasks can be performed without an international perspective. This article aims to inspire the reader to shift their focus from acting locally to thinking globally and how being social helps us do so.

### 1 International focus on social work

Social work does not only take place at the local level. It can no longer be denied that rapid developments in communication and transport have significantly diminished the boundaries between local and regional markets worldwide. Internationalisation contributes to the social work field as well. It broadens one's perspective, fosters openness to alternative ideas, and provides insight into the possibilities and limitations of intercultural communication. In addition,

methodologies developed in social work abroad also bring us knowledge and experiences (Gerull *et al.* 2025). Those different approaches - in terms of culture, social and socio-economic context - can inspire improved approaches in the national and local context (Cox and Pawar 2006).

Internationalisation can thus motivate social workers to enhance their knowledge and skills. Something you take for granted yourself need not be so for others. It helps put any prejudices into perspective (Gerull *et al.* 2025). People who are never encouraged to view the world from another's perspective are less likely to recognise the limits of their understanding.

## 2 The emergence of an international focus

To illustrate the developments around the international focus of social work, an exploration of the history is given first. At the beginning of the 20th century, cross-border contacts between social workers emerged. These social workers dealt with social problems focused on housing, child labour, alcoholism and poverty. The realisation that charitable efforts were inadequate led to the pursuit of a more professional framework for social work. In 1919, an innovative international collaboration on social welfare emerged, especially in *Western Europe*, which was neither encouraged nor funded by the government. This bottom-up initiative was first put into practice by Dr Rene Sand, the Belgian secretary-general of the Red Cross (Zelenev 2018). In 1927, plans for the first international conference on social welfare were further developed in Prague. For this, the national social work conferences held in America since 1874 served as inspiration. Eventually, the first worldwide 'International Conference on Social Work and Social Welfare (ICSW1928)' was held in Paris from 8 to 13 July 1928. There were a total of 2,500 participants from 42 countries. This conference is widely considered to mark the emergence of an international focus on social work (Cox and Pawar 2006; Zelenev 2018).

## 3 Outcomes ICSW1928

One of the main outcomes of this conference was the establishment of three international associations. Of these, two were established locally, namely the International Conference on Social Work (ICSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). A third international association focusing on social work education, International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), was officially established a year later in Berlin (Cox and Pawar 2006; Zelenev 2018).

During the conference, it became clear that social work is prevalent worldwide, shares ethical concerns and has similar social problems. In all participating countries, the profession had a low status and was poorly paid. At the same time, in many countries, there was a shift from public to private forms of social work, always embedded in a specific local context. This made it impossible to arrive at a universal definition of the social worker (Cox and Pawar 2006).

*World War II* temporarily threw a spanner in the works, but soon after 1945, social workers sought each other out again (Zelenev 2018). The goals were mainly professional development, professionalisation and recognition of the profession. There was a movement to develop professional codes, along the lines of the medical professions. These three international associations still exist today and continue to promote exchange within social work worldwide.

## 4 International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)

Founded in 1928 as the *International Permanent Secretariat of Social Workers* and reformed after *World War II*, emerging eventually as the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) in 1956 (Cox and Pawar 2006). Nowadays the IFSW has evolved into an international organisation with members from nearly every country. Approximately 99% of its members are national professional associations. The association is structured into five regions, with IFSW Europe being one of them (IFSW).

The aim of the association is to promote social work as a profession worldwide. To this end, the organisation sets professional standards and ethical guidelines, leading to the first international code of ethics in 1976 (Cox and Pawar 2006). IFSW also speaks out on global issues and promotes knowledge exchange through conferences, articles and consultative status at the *United Nations*, including UNHCR and UNICEF, and WHO, among others. In addition, the *European section* also represents social work at the *Conference of Non-Governmental Organisations* (CINGO), in consultative status with the Council of Europe (IFSW).

Members exchange knowledge and experiences at various events, including the annual *Delegates Meeting*. This gathering also serves as a platform to discuss key initiatives, such as the *Eco-social Work Project*. Another example is the *Responsive Project*, funded by the *EU*, which explores how social work organisations incorporate client feedback into their practices.

## 5 International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW)

The former *International Council on Social Work* (ICSW) was created in 1928 in Paris to strengthen social and professional cooperation in the area of human welfare. At the 13<sup>th</sup> *International Conference in Washington* in 1966, the association changed its name from '*Social Work*' to '*Social Welfare*' to better reflect the broadening of its scope, without changing the abbreviation ICSW (Zelenev 2018). The ICSW represents national and local organisations in more than 70 countries. In the 1960's, ICSW became active on several continents, with more members from low-income countries. Today, ICSW is working through nine regional networks (ICSW).

Advocacy, knowledge building and technical support are at the heart of global projects, with ICSW and its members actively committed in various areas of social development, social welfare and social justice. These include issues such as food and nutrition, welfare and health, social protection, education and housing, as well as issues such as

economic development, human rights and community participation (Zelenev 2018).

ICSW collects and disseminates information to civil society organisations, governments and intergovernmental organisations. This is done through journals, reports, electronic newsletters and the website. ICSW conducts research and organises consultations to analyse problems and develop policies. It also organises specific forums, seminars and workshops on specific topics (ICSW).

## 6 International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW)

During the conference In 1928 in Paris, Alice Salomon was asked to take over the chair of the division on social work education. At the end of the conference, ten different social work school leaders decided to establish an association especially focused on social work education. The IASSW was officially founded in 1929 in Berlin. Alice Salomon became the first president (Kuhlmann 2001). IASSW's vision is to promote and develop '*Excellence in social work education, research and scholarship across the globe, in pursuit of a more just and equitable world*' (IASSW). IASSW is an international association of institutions of social work education, organisations supporting social work education and social work educators, by developing standards to enhance the quality of social work education (IASSW).

IASSW newsletters, publications, and conferences represent major links between schools of social work worldwide to promote social work nationally (Cox and Pawar 2006). The association also represents social work education in a consultative status with the United Nations. Today, the IASSW has five regional associations, from which each president is the vice-president of the IASSW. This led to the construction of good cooperation between the regional associations (IASSW).

## 7 Stronger together for social work

As said before, these three associations were founded almost simultaneously and, till today, strengthen each other through close

collaboration. A significant contribution of these international organisations lies in their articulation of the fundamental values underpinning social work, as well as in their facilitation of dedicated occasions for their critical reflection and reinforcement. The most appealing example of such a collaboration is the global definition of social work, which the IFSW and IASSW last adopted at their *General Assembly* in 2014 (IASSW; IFSW): *"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels."*

Furthermore, the IFSW and IASSW jointly adopted the '*Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles*', which remains unchanged since 2018. Together, they also formulated the '*Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training*'. These standards reflect both the universal values of social work and its global diversity, distinguishing between compulsory elements for all programs and aspirational goals that institutions are encouraged to implement when possible (IASSW; IFSW).

The three international associations work together through the '*Global agenda for social work and social development*'. They see this as a guideline for social workers and educators to raise the profile and visibility of social work and to develop mutual partnerships. It is intended to empower social workers with greater confidence and strengthen their role in shaping policy development. The overarching theme of the *Global Agenda for 2020-2030* is '*Co-building Inclusive Social Transformation*'. Unlike the previous *Global Agenda 2010-2020*, where the biennial themes were predetermined for the whole

decade, this time the international associations have adopted a more flexible approach. An appropriate theme will now be chosen each year in line with current societal developments. The theme of the global agenda 2025 is 'Strengthening intergenerational solidarity for sustainable well-being' (IASSW; ICSW; IFSW).

Since 2007, the third Tuesday of March has been celebrated annually as *World Social Work Day*. Initiated by the IFSW, ICSW and IASSW, with IFSW leading its implementation, this day honours the dedication of social workers worldwide. It highlights their compassionate efforts to empower individuals, build resilience, and foster positive change. Over time, the celebration has become a valued tradition for many local universities and social work organisations around the globe. The annual theme is linked to the global agenda of social work (IASSW; ICSW; IFSW, no date).

Finally, the three international associations jointly organise the world conference every two years in even-numbered calendar years. From 26 to 29 June 2026, it will take place for the first time in the heart of *Africa*, namely in *Nairobi, Kenya*, with the theme: "*Harambee for sustainable shared futures*". In 2028, the conference will serve as a commemorative event marking the 100th anniversary of the international social work associations (IASSW; ICSW; IFSW).

## 8 European associations for social work

Since the foundation of the international social work associations, *European social work associations* have emerged in increasing numbers. For example, the IFSW has regional associations, including *IFSW Europe*. They promote worldwide on a more regional level what IFSW means. Often, the national professional associations are members of the regional associations (IFSW).

Over the years, the IASSW also saw the rise of regional associations. The *European Regional Group* (ERG) always had good contact with the IASSW, but gradually the ERG increasingly went its own way and became independent of the IASSW. This resulted in a name change to the *European Association of*



*Schools of Social Work* (EASSW) in 1980. The EASSW started to work independently. In the past 25 years, there has been closer contact again and the EASSW now works intensively with the IASSW.

*The European Association for Schools of Social Work* (EASSW) develops social work education and social work standards at European level. You can become a member as an educational institution or as an individual. A delegate of the board has consultative status with the *Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations* (INGOs) of the *Council of Europe*. EASSW organises a biennial conference in odd calendar years. During this conference, several awards will be presented, including the *Most Innovative Education Award* (named after the famous Alice Salomon), the *Research Award* and the *Student Award*. In addition, special interest groups (SIGs) are given a platform, both financially supported to make this possible and during the conference. Members can also apply for funding for small projects and regional events. EASSW offers the latest news on *European social work education*, members have access to the *Journal of Social Work* and are allowed to network and search for suitable *European partners for international research projects* (EASSW).

Even within *Europe*, we see more and more branches these days. For example, in 1965 the *Nordic Association of Schools of Social Work* (NASSW) was founded. This association focuses on promoting education in social work by stimulating cooperation between universities and colleges in the Scandinavian countries (IASSW; NASSW).

*The Eastern Europe sub-regional Association of the Schools of Social Work* (EEsrASSW) was founded in 2008. It is an extensive network of social work academics from *Eastern Europe* and aims to promote cooperation between schools of social work, teachers and researchers in the region. In addition, *EEsrASSW* focuses on strengthening regional knowledge and research expertise within the global social work community (EEsrASSW; IASSW).

*The European Social Work Research Association* (ESWRA) was founded in 2014 at

the *4th European Conference for Social Work Research* (ECSWR) in Bolzano, Italy. The association was established in response to the growing need for a European infrastructure for social work research and follows the successful conferences organised since 2011. The association aims to promote social work research in *Europe* through collaboration, knowledge exchange and strengthening research capacity. ESWRA has over 600 members from more than 30 countries and organises the annual *European Conference for Social Work Research*. The association also publishes the journal *European Social Work Research* and an associated book series (ESWRA).

## 9 International associations versus international networks

In addition to the various international and European associations, many international social work networks play a significant role in promoting collaboration. The official associations are affiliated with the *United Nations* (worldwide associations) or the *European Union* (European associations). In a network, professionals often represent international associations and carry out projects together. For example, IFSW Europe is a member of The *European Anti-Poverty Network* (EAPN), which examines the state of poverty reduction in various countries and advises *Brussels* on it (EAPN, no date). Sometimes professionals are involved in a personal capacity, whether or not based on their interests and the work they do. *European Network on Intercultural Elderly Care* (ENIEC) is a good practice for a network with social workers and researchers that focuses on older migrants (ENIEC).

## 10 Internationalisation of the social work curriculum

The process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension is an accepted definition of internationalising the curriculum (Beelen and Jones 2015). Internationalisation at home is one of the streams in international education and comprises activities that support students to de-

velop international understanding and intercultural skills (Beelen and Jones 2015). Appropriate activities as part of the curriculum are, first, the international classroom. This involves being taught in an internationally composed class of local students along with students from abroad. Teaching in a common language, mostly English, is needed as a means of communication (Berends 2017a). Second, when it comes to acquiring good practices from abroad, international guest lectures help to give an international perspective on professional practice. This is usually made possible by organising an international event as part of the curriculum. Finally, we use international literature to highlight concepts that are common in international professional social work literature, making them accessible to students during their (study) career (Berends 2017b).

Internationalisation abroad is the other stream in international education (Beelen and Jones 2015). Therefore, the European Union considers it important to gain knowledge and experience in *Europe* or abroad, and therefore provides the *Erasmus+ programme*. Every EU citizen, regardless of age, has the opportunity to study, work or participate in international partnerships abroad in the fields of education, training, sport or youth work (*European Commission*). Furthermore, students can go abroad on a long-term as on study abroad (Berends 2017c) or internship abroad (Goossen and Berends 2017). Another possibility is going abroad on a short term as part of the social work curriculum. A study trip or participating in an international conference are good examples for this (Berends 2016).

### 11 Added value of international experience abroad

In highlighting the added value of a long-term internationalisation abroad learning experience, the study by Gerull et al. (2025) distinguishes between knowledge, skills and personal growth. Knowledge as a starting point, perspectives on social work gained through international experiences abroad, foster critical reflections on social work poli-

cies and practices at home. Exposure to different approaches abroad creates space for critical awareness of domestic practices and shows that what is familiar is not necessarily universal. In many cases, internships take place in contexts where social work is highly valued, and interns are given greater practical responsibilities than they would normally have at home. Regarding skills development, students reported having learned a new language, most commonly English. Additionally, their cultural sensitivity increased as a result of experiencing what it means to be a newcomer. Being abroad required flexibility to adapt to a new environment and the courage to navigate unfamiliar contexts. In terms of personal growth, international experiences enhanced students' confidence in their abilities and strengthened their capacity to deal with challenges and frustrations (Gerull et al. 2025).

### 12 Disadvantages of a long-term international experience abroad

The study of Gerull et al. (2015) also mentioned the disadvantages of a long-term internationalisation abroad during your social work studies. First, during the stay abroad, a decline in proficiency in the native language is often observed. The subsequent disadvantages occurred upon returning home. Re-integrating is frequently more challenging than leaving. Upon return, individuals often experience difficulty remaining with the same organisation for an extended period, as they have become accustomed to greater autonomy and seek innovative and challenging work environments similar to those encountered during their stay abroad (Gerull et al. 2025).

### CONCLUSION

This article underpins the added value of an international perspective on social work and social work education. Internationalisation supports social workers to broaden their horizons in methods and skills. If you want to add an international perspective as a social worker, it is recommended to use a few principles as a guide. First, actively seek contact. By making contact, you expand your

network, create valuable relationships and gain insight into the lives and experiences of others. Foster international friendships while being guided by the ethical principles of social work. Apply *regula aurea*, or in other words, treat others as you would like to be treated yourself. Second, adapt to local situations and invent indigenous social work by combining foreign and local expertise. Last, broaden your horizons by gaining knowledge and developing skills in social work around the world. In short, to make international social work part of your profession as a social worker: think global, act local and be social.

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