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**FROM ETHICAL CHALLENGES ON  
THE SOCIAL WORK FRONTLINE TO  
JOINT ACTION FOR A NEW ECO-  
SOCIAL WORLD**

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**VAN DE ETHISCHE UITDAGINGEN AAN  
DE FRONTLIJN VAN SOCIAL WORK  
NAAR GEZAMENLIJKE ACTIE VOOR EEN  
NIEUWE ECO-SOCIALE WERELD**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article traces the social work journey through the experience of the global COVID-19 crisis as it impacts on the profession's underpinning values. It discusses the route from the initial challenges experienced by social workers worldwide, to the global profession advocating for a shift from

individualistic social protection systems to platforms that prevent social crises. In the context of learning from the pandemic, the Global Agenda for Social Work theme 'Ubuntu: I am because we are' has brought enquiry and clarity into the re-examination of social work values and principles. This has led to the global profession working with others to call for the unlocking of the silos separating health and social protection systems and heightened engagement with communities, the United Nations and political leaders. The article concludes with a proposition that the social work profession should support an inclusive global conversation on the values needed to shape a new eco-social world where no one is left behind.

## **KEYWORDS**

COVID-19, social work ethics, eco-social, Ubuntu

## **SAMENVATTING**

Dit artikel start met een reis langs de ervaringen van social workers tijdens de mondiale COVID-19 pandemie en staat stil bij de impact daarvan op de kernwaarden van het beroep. Het bespreekt de weg die social workers over de hele wereld hebben afgelegd vanaf de eerste uitdagingen tot het mondiale pleidooi voor een omslag van individuele bescherming naar gezamenlijk gedragen preventie van sociale crises. Vanuit het motto van 'Ubuntu: Ik ben omdat wij zijn', het thema van de Mondiale Agenda voor Social Work, worden de social work waarden en principes belicht en worden lessen getrokken voor de toekomst. Het artikel beschrijft waarom het nodig is om met elkaar de schotten tussen de verschillende systemen van gezondheid en sociale veiligheid af te breken en pleit voor het aangaan van een sterker engagement met de gemeenschap, de United Nations en politieke leiders. Het artikel besluit met een oproep aan social work als beroep om een mondiale dialoog te starten over de waarden die nodig zijn om een nieuwe eco-sociale wereld te creëren, een wereld waar niemand wordt uitgesloten.

## **TREFWOORDEN**

COVID-19, social work ethics, eco-social, Ubuntu

## **INTRODUCTION**

The experience of living and working during the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted many calls to learn from this experience and 'build back better' (see Bodewig & Hallegatte, 2020; Harley

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& Acheampong, 2021; OECD, 2020). Yet how do we ensure these visions of a better world are not only inclusive, egalitarian and ecologically sustainable, but also implemented in practice? What is the role of social workers and how can social work be reimagined and rebuilt for a post-pandemic world? This article addresses these questions through exploring the practical and ethical challenges faced by social workers during COVID-19; the creative responses generated on the frontline; and how the lessons learned have led to international collaborations between global social work and health associations to set out a vision for a 'new eco-social world'.

We write from the perspective of working for (Truell) and with (Banks) the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) – a federation of 146 national associations of social workers, which promotes social work worldwide and advocates with national and international policymakers on issues affecting the people with whom social workers work. During the COVID-19 pandemic, from its initial identification in China as an epidemic in early 2020 to the devastating second wave in India in April-July 2021, IFSW has supported individuals and national associations in their efforts to provide social work services in adverse conditions. In the process, IFSW gained unique intelligence on local circumstances and responses. Insights from this work have been collated, recorded and reflected upon at regular intervals in written reports (IFSW, 2020a,b,c,d,e; Truell & Crompton, 2020). This article draws on these materials and insights, including a survey in May 2020 of frontline social workers' experiences of ethical challenges (Banks *et al.*, 2020a) and a global statement made by IFSW on 1<sup>st</sup> May, 2021 (Martinez & Truell, 2021), outlining a vision to "co-create a new eco-social world" (see also IFSW, 2021a).

## EARLY REPORTS FROM CHINA

Regular reports from national associations of social work to IFSW included analysis of how welfare systems were coping or failing, and changes social workers championed to create structural change to support people regarded as vulnerable, which at times included whole populations.

The first of 80 reports (IFSW, 2020c) was from the Chinese Association of Social Workers (CASW). It was published shortly after the announcement of what was then called an epidemic in Wuhan. CASW's fast action locally, as well as sharing learning worldwide, demonstrated their ethical responsibility not only to the people they immediately served, but also globally given the risk that epidemics spread. The report highlighted the challenges for Chinese social workers, and their

achievements. It acted as a preparation guide for national associations of social work worldwide. Under lockdown conditions, services needed immediately to shift to low-contact and online formats. People regarded as vulnerable, such as with severe mental health or physical disabilities, would need specific support plans. The general public would need information and to know their role in containing the virus and how safely to support others. By the end of the 48-hour period, CASW had demonstrated how significant inroads in each of these areas could be achieved.

As social workers and other professions began work to contain the virus in Wuhan, it was detected in other parts of East Asia. However, in contrast to the collaboration within the global social work profession, there was no cohesive learning and cooperation strategy between governments. When lockdown happened in South Korea, the Korean Association of Social Workers reported that their welfare systems had collapsed. This was partly because some services closed due to excessive lockdown conditions imposed by the government, resulting in services that remained open becoming overburdened. This was common in many countries, as COVID-19 spread and restrictions on human contact and movement were introduced. Social workers struggled to continue working, often feeling isolated, unsupported and under-valued. In the next section we offer a snapshot drawn from a survey in May 2020 of the everyday challenges faced by social workers worldwide and their responses.

## **REFLECTIONS ON ETHICAL AND PRACTICAL CHALLENGES FROM THE FRONTLINE**

In May 2020, the Social Work Ethics Research Partnership (an international group of academics working with IFSW) issued a survey requesting information from social workers worldwide on the ethical challenges they were facing due to COVID-19. This drew 607 responses from 54 countries (for details of the methodology and overall findings, see Banks *et al.*, 2020a). The survey described ethical challenges as “situations that give you cause for concern, or when it is difficult to decide what is the right action to take” (Banks *et al.*, 2020a, p. 2). Although the survey asked for details of ‘ethical challenges’, the accounts given were as much about practical challenges as they were about the specifically ethical. This is not surprising, as all social work practice has ethical dimensions; but the ethical elements have to be abstracted and named to be made visible.

Working during the pandemic was experienced as an ethical nightmare by many respondents. Social workers’ usual ways of working (including in-person meetings and provision of practical support) were no longer available, while needs were increasing. Alternative responses - digital communications, outdoor meetings, reliance on community support in place of professional interventions, and closure of services - all had as yet unevaluated ethical implications. These

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alternative ways of working raised ethical issues of confidentiality, privacy and trust in relationships, and questions about the safety, choice, dignity, well-being and harm of people using services, their families and the public. Respondents' answers to questions asking them to describe their main ethical challenges and give a specific example showed social workers globally experiencing many common challenges, although the contexts in which they were working varied enormously. This article focusses particularly on how social workers *responded* to the ethical and practical challenges they faced. We briefly summarise below the types of challenge reported to set their responses in context. Detailed analysis is given in Banks *et al.* (2020a,b) from which this list is drawn:

1. Creating and maintaining trusting, honest and empathic relationships via phone or internet with due regard to privacy and confidentiality, or in person with protective equipment.
2. Prioritising service user needs and demands, which are greater and different due to the pandemic, when resources are stretched/unavailable and full assessments are often not possible.
3. Balancing service user rights, needs and risks against personal risk to social workers and others, in order to provide services as well as possible.
4. Deciding whether to follow national and organisational policies, procedures or guidance (existing or new) or to use professional discretion in circumstances where the policies seem inappropriate, confused or lacking.
5. Acknowledging and handling emotions, fatigue and the need for self-care, when working in unsafe and stressful circumstances.
6. Using the lessons learned from working during the pandemic to rethink social work in the future.

Although similar ethical challenges arose across the world, social workers' ways of handling these varied depending on personal circumstances, type of work, stage of the pandemic, resources available and the state and status of social work in their country. The survey captured the COVID-related experiences of social workers from January to May 2020, hence including people in countries severely affected by lock-downs and high death rates and those taking more precautionary measures to prevent potential spread of the virus. Respondents' accounts contained within them several different types of reaction to the situations faced, including:

- Confusion, panic and ethical paralysis.
- Loss, negativity and moral distress.

- Creativity and ethical logistics.
- Ethical reflections on what we can learn for the future.

### **Confusion, panic and ethical paralysis**

Many respondents reported difficulties in knowing what to do in the early stages of their government's decision to restrict in-person interactions. They reported confusion about what would be the right decisions and actions, and were desperately seeking clarity and guidance. Often there was a gap between the announcement of restrictions, and the laws, policies and guidance outlining the mechanisms for implementation and enforcement. Some social workers reported there being no guidance, or felt that guidance issued by governments, employers and/or managers was unclear, contradictory, impractical or even unethical. For example, a forensic social worker from Puerto Rico described her frustration at the absence of formal protocols and training for using digital technology, due to "lack of organization and improvisation on the part of supervisors and managers and the government."

Many social work services closed their offices, withdrew from conducting assessments and visiting vulnerable service users, or implemented very tight restrictions. There was a general feeling of panic in the early weeks. An Italian coordinator of health and social services spoke of a "sense of helplessness and anxiety about what could happen in the absence of support and control from the social services." Some social workers with underlying health conditions, or vulnerable family members, worked from home, feeling it was too risky to venture into the office or make home visits. Several reported feeling guilty about not playing a more active role - experiencing a kind of ethical paralysis (inability to think through the ethical issues or to act, often due to the overwhelming complexity and novelty of the situations faced). A Spanish mental health social worker commented:

I have worked from home, and I have felt bad for not doing it in person, as a worker in an essential service. I try to establish a balance between respect for my health and the duty of assistance to individuals and families. I feel that we have not given the maximum, working at a distance, and it generates discomfort and shame, but on the other hand I feel more protected at home ... It is complicated.

### **Loss, negativity and moral distress**

Many social workers reflected on the profound impact of COVID-19 restrictions on relationships with service users, experiencing an inability to do 'proper' social work. A UK child and family social

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worker described current practice as “anti-social social work”, saying that it “fails families. Even though I understand the need to protect people; it has felt so unjust and oppressive.” The loss of social workers’ skilled, caring presence was a common theme, encapsulated by this UK child protection social worker:

I worry about children on my caseload being considered ‘safe’ because I did a phone call or FaceTime ‘visit’. These children are not getting the proximity and presence of me in their homes, and I am not able to check that their environment is safe, that dangerous people aren’t in the home, that it doesn’t smell of drugs in the house, and so on. I don’t feel that I am protecting these children enough.

Although the majority of social workers were clearly doing their best in adverse circumstances, this did not stop them feeling inadequate. As a Slovenian mental health social worker said: “People felt that a phone call saved them, but I constantly felt I am not doing enough”. These social workers, and many others, could be described as experiencing moral distress (knowing the right thing to do but not being able to do it, see Jameton, 1984; Weinberg, 2009). This is encapsulated by a Rwandan social work lecturer who had been asked to stay at home, describing her “inability to intervene while I know there are people out there who need support”.

### **Creativity and ethical logistics**

Some social workers were more immediately creative, rising to the challenges, doing their work differently and sometimes even breaking existing rules in order to support people in need. For example, a Nigerian hospital social worker reported that he and his colleagues used their own bank accounts and cash machines to assist relatives of patients to make payments for hospital care when no cash withdrawal from banks was available, even though this was against hospital rules. Many social workers used insecure digital platforms (such as TikTok or WhatsApp) to communicate with service users as these were all that were available; while a Canadian social worker reported creating her own electronic consent form. Many became more creative as time went on, working out how to operate in ways that felt relatively safe – from virtual home visits to dropping supplies at people’s doors or organising outdoor meetings and children’s activities. A manager of a German NGO reported moving food distribution to the streets in a food truck; Hong Kong community centres reopened for the most isolated older people; in India a social worker advocated for special support for migrant workers; while in Pakistan a young social worker educated people in rural areas about hygiene and the realities of COVID. A Dutch social work manager, having spent some time working from home while his team was doing

face-to-face work, came into the office and did walking meetings with service users to relieve his stressed colleagues.

Rethinking what was the right course of action in these changed circumstances required effort. Several respondents used the term 'ethical struggle' to describe their experiences. For example, a palliative care team manager in Japan said that when discussing end of life decision-making with a woman and her family choosing between home and hospital: "I feel like all of us has so much ethical struggle. I'm not sure what was right in her case." Once a judgement was made about what would be the right course of action in a particular case, it was still a struggle to decide how implement the action, with due regard to dignity, choice, privacy and respect. This involved 'ethical logistics' (having to work very hard to do the right action, see Banks *et al.*, 2020b), including strategic planning to ensure all risks were assessed and minimised, balancing the use of digital technology with in-person interactions, and checking availability of protective equipment.

### **Ethical reflections on learning for the future**

In May 2020, the idea of using learning from COVID-19 and looking to the future was not a particularly common response. However, some social workers realised that valuable lessons were emerging. Several respondents noted the rise of neo-liberalism and managerialism in many countries, resulting in micro-management of social workers, and impeding the social work response to the pandemic. Others regarded bureaucracy as irrelevant in a time of crisis, which required improvisation and quick responses based on professional expertise and ethical discretion. A French special educator in children's social work remarked that the crisis was emphasising the problems in social work, which had become more bureaucratised and administrative. Finally, as an Italian social worker said: "I think the professional community should reflect on what happened and how it happened, rework their own personal and professional experience, review the methodology and tools to deal with such difficult situations to be more prepared".

Social workers from various countries noted the role of COVID-19 in exacerbating existing inequities and highlighting gaps and inadequacies in services. As a social worker leading a domestic violence programme in the USA said: "the current public health crisis is highlighting what we have known for decades, the division between those who have and have not is enormous." A head of medical social work in Brunei reflected on the lack of efficiency and resources in the Brunei social services system compared with other countries: "the system we have needs to step up further, with or without Covid. As a social worker, it is not a work of one, it needs togetherness and cooperation



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from different agencies to help with the decision making.” These reflections illustrate individual social workers’ heightened awareness of the structural contexts in which social work takes place and the need for systems and structures to change to embrace more holistic and egalitarian approaches. They are indicative of a developing conversation in the profession, provoked by the experience of working during the pandemic, about the principles underpinning current practice in all its diversity around the world.

## MOVING TO A NEW AGENDA

Based on social workers’ accounts of working in restricted and risky conditions and continuing reports from national associations, in May 2020 IFSW circulated to its global membership key guidance messages in anticipation that the virus would spread worldwide. The messages drew on experiences from the countries where the virus had been identified at the time, and the profession’s global experience of working with other pandemics such as SARS, Ebola and HIV-Aids. The messages highlighted the need for national associations of social work to:

- advocate that their governments recognise that a social response is imperative alongside a medical response.
- advocate that social services remain open during lockdowns but shift practice to online/mobile or physically distanced contact.
- work with social services assisting them with adapting practice and establishing local systems to manage the ethical dilemmas of frontline staff.
- advocate that the public must be regarded as a key actor in controlling the virus.
- consider how COVID challenges can be used to transform social service cultures to become more empowering and focused on prevention of social crises.
- share their local innovative practice and policy solutions with the international profession for others to learn from.
- reach marginalised communities. (IFSW, 2020d)

As the epidemic spread and was eventually reclassified as a pandemic, many of these points were successfully advanced by national social work associations. By August 2020, most countries which had enforced lockdowns had kept social services open and recognised social workers as essential frontline staff. This led to the message about the transformation of social services cultures becoming a major point of development for the international social work profession. This peaked in July 2020 when more than 20,000 social workers from 185

countries participated in a global online conference. The aim was to set short- and long-term strategies in the next stage of the Global Agenda for Social Work (IFSW, 2020e). It was recognised that the profession's role and impact in transforming policy required revisiting the ethical foundations of social services. A paradigm shift was needed, involving moving services from an individual focus to working with communities to develop platforms that prevent social crises. The five-day conference concluded with five integrated pillars that globally social workers agreed to advance in the next ten years (ibid.):

- *Valuing social work as an essential service* - the role of the social work profession in connecting people, communities and systems to work together to control the virus and other social, health or economic crises.
- *Co-building inclusive social transformation* - the need for participatory democracy in addressing the structural challenges such as gender and ethnic equality and climate justice.
- *Ubuntu: I am because we are* - nurturing relationships in the context of interdependency.
- *Transforming social protection systems* - strengthening ways of living between peoples, communities and the environment.
- *Promoting diversity and the power of joint social action* - the need for people to work together, locally, nationally and globally to co-design and co-build thriving communities and societies for people and the planet.

These pillars call for social workers globally to reclaim their community development roots and reject the individualised and reactive social service paradigm that has dominated much of the world over the last decades. This call draws upon a long tradition of critical, radical, ecological and green social work, gaining new impetus and urgency due to the global pandemic (see Dominelli, 2021; Lavalette, 2020; Martinez, 2020). This is a strategic push not to return to the disempowering neo-liberal approaches of recent years. As Claudio Pedrelli, a frontline social worker in Italy pointed out, "It is all too easy to let services and arrangements slip back to the way they were focused on the individual, case management and non-inclusive professional decision-making" (Truell & Crompton, 2020, p. 40).

## **RE-EXAMINING THE SOCIAL WORK VALUE BASE**

In November 2020, IFSW decided to lead the first 12 months of the Global Agenda with the theme 'Ubuntu' (see Mayaka & Truell, 2021). Social workers in the African region proposed

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Ubuntu, which is relatively well-known globally, having been popularised by Nelson Mandela. Mugumbate and Chereni (2020) describe Ubuntu as:

a collection of values and practices that the people of Africa or of African origin view as making people authentic human beings. While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing – an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental, and spiritual world.

This African philosophy both resonates with and challenges social work's professional values. It resonates because the international definition of social work and statement of ethical principles (IFSW, 2018) enjoin social workers to focus on relationships between peoples and their environments. Ubuntu gained unprecedented international support with social workers spontaneously translating the World Social Work Day poster into over 100 of the world's languages (IFSW, 2021b). Many social workers from other non-Western countries commented in global webinars that Ubuntu also aligned with the more communal worldviews prevailing in Asia, the Middle East and amongst Indigenous peoples across the world. However, Ubuntu, along with other non-Western philosophies, also challenges us to think more deeply about the underpinning values and societal roots of the social service models within which social workers operate.

There are many critiques of the dominance of individualistic values derived from Western philosophy in global literature and institutions (e.g. Nwosimiri, 2017; Stewart, 2012). Similarly, the practice of professional and ethical imperialism in social work (exporting professional and ethical practices and norms from the West/Global North across the world) has been heavily criticised (e.g. Banks, 2015; Gray, Coates, Yellowbird & Hetherington, 2013; Midgley, 1981, 2017). Although moves to indigenise social work practice in different countries and regions are growing, drawing on local cultural and religious beliefs and worldviews, there is still a need to tackle the dominance of Western values in global statements and guidance. Yet at the same time, it is also important to acknowledge that local cultural norms may be damaging and oppressive to individuals and groups (Sewpaul, Kreitzer & Raniga, 2021). Simply adopting a traditional African philosophy ('Ubuntu') uncritically as a solution to social and political problems is at best naïve, and at worst could be equally as damaging as western liberalism's pursuit of individual freedom of choice. Taken too far, solidarity with others and a burdened sense of responsibility and interconnectedness can result in submergence of individual agency, sidelining of the rights and interests of minority/stigmatised groups and pressure to conform.

The task for international social work is to take account of critiques as well as positive accounts of the value of Ubuntu (see International Finance Program, 2018; Matolino & Kwindigwi, 2013; Mwipikeni, 2018; Oyowe, 2013), working hard at developing nuanced understandings and practices that may move interactively between 'I am because we are' and, perhaps, 'We are because I am too'. The attractiveness of Ubuntu is not just that it is founded on a communitarian philosophy, but also that it embraces the ecological and spiritual dimensions of life on earth. These may not be appreciated in neo-liberal capitalist modes of thinking. However, in the context of a growing consciousness of human-induced climate change and challenges to anthropocentrism, a critical embracing of Ubuntu opens the door for dialogue on an alternative paradigm for social work and indeed for understanding and acting in the world more generally.

The IFSW Ethics Commission, which monitors ethical standards in social work worldwide, has commenced a global discussion to reflect on how Ubuntu as a philosophy can expand understanding of the profession's principles. Mayaka and Truell (2021) indicate some fruitful topics for exploration, which we draw on here. For example, *The Global Statement of Ethical Principles* (IFSW, 2018) advocates promoting the 'self-determination' of the people with whom social workers work. This is one of the traditional social work values, although it can have very different meanings in different cultures. From a Western perspective it may be interpreted as individuals' rights to make their own decisions and choices with due regard to the rights and interests of others. In more communal cultures and settings, the focus may be more on the collective rights of groups or nations to self-determine their futures. With Ubuntu as a Global Agenda theme, a paradigm shift is proposed that would entail reframing this principle as 'co- and self-determination' or simply 'relational self-determination' (often called 'relational autonomy', see Banks, 2021, p. 105-6; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). Relational self-determination is based on understanding people as constituted first and foremost through their relationships with others.

A further example relates to human rights. As Mayaka and Truell (2021, p. 9) argue:

Human rights are often understood in the context of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and, therefore, thought of as a tool in social work to emphasise each individual's right to a secure life. This concept is not necessarily problematic within Ubuntu but does not represent a full framework of understanding of how rights are applied in the social context nor does a Western view of human rights emphasise the responsibilities of all community members to one another as a mechanism for realising each person's human rights.

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Ubuntu highlights a culture based on interdependent (relational) rights, with people taking responsibility with and for others. This means that the realisation of each person's rights relies on a common practice of responsibility. Social work practice therefore requires a focus on the interrelationship between the responsibilities of each person and their communities as human rights defenders. This entails embracing the concept of 'relational rights' (Banks, 2021, p. 145-6) and building on the 'third generation' human rights identified by the United Nations that are attributable to collectivities (communities or nations).

As a last example, we take the principle of 'empowerment', which is a much used, although contested, concept within social work. At its most simplistic level, empowerment can be regarded as one person giving power to another, such as a social worker giving power to a person using their services, or enabling a person to take power. However, as Mayaka and Truell (2021, p. 10) point out, the Second Report of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (IASW, IFSW, and ICSW, 2016) rejects this interpretation of empowerment, arguing that people should lead their own development, alongside mutual support in families and communities, sometimes working with social workers. Drawings from the philosophy of Ubuntu and other indigenous bodies of thought, Mayaka and Truell (2021, p. 10) recommend thinking in terms of 'mutual empowerment' or 'combined and self-empowerment'. This leads to a more radical version of collective empowerment ('power with'), which may entail social workers working alongside people who use services in taking action together for social change. Concepts of solidarity, collectivity, community and relational rights and responsibilities are important in this context.

## CO-BUILDING WORKFORCE ALLIANCES FOR ACTION

Alongside this enquiry into extending understanding of social work values, the pandemic has also opened opportunities to expand partnerships in the quest for exploring new configurations of global values. Prior to the pandemic the health and social work sectors operated in distinct silos. In most countries health and social work are defined by differing policy and legislation and funded by different budgets. This often leads to failures in recognising how social and health conditions are interlinked, contributing to undermining economic stability as well as creating differing health and social service practice pathways that lack co-ordination.

This is being addressed through the new Coalition of Global Health, Primary Care and Social Work Professionals, created to steer national, regional and global policy in relation to the COVID-19

crisis. This coalition, representing 160 million professionals, has advanced public statements and sought high level engagement with political leaders to co-design and co-build health and social services systems to respond to crises like the COVID-19 pandemic by working towards ensuring health and social equalities at local and global levels (WFPHA, 2021a,b).

The Coalition has further identified the importance of the public's role in co-designing and co-managing the challenges created by the pandemic. Community leaders working with professionals have changed cultural attitudes to create safe physical distancing protocols and helped people manage anxiety at a time of great stress. Communities have also engaged with professionals on COVID-related unemployment. For example, lockdown prevented rural communities in Sierra Leone from trading in their traditional marketplaces. Local cooperative soap manufacturing was established to replace lost income and enhance hygiene practices in the community (Truell & Crompton, 2020). In Aotearoa New Zealand the leading health professional and Prime Minister co-led a team of five million (the entire population), which quickly resulted in high levels of public trust, immediate control of the virus and a sustained, manageable level of new infections with very few deaths (Robert, 2020). These approaches have created cultures of joint responsibility and a sense of a 'societal team' in overcoming challenges.

## **RESHAPING GLOBAL VALUES**

The world is witnessing a resurgence of groups demanding their rights. Climate strikes, Black Lives Matter, campaigns for women's and refugee rights, alongside anti-austerity and pro-democracy protests have taken place across the world's regions. There has been further significant discussion on the need to emerge from the pandemic with new internationally agreed values. In several speeches, the UN Secretary-General has highlighted that the challenges we face are not due to COVID-19 alone, and that we must reset our values and priorities to address inequality and climate change (DW, 2020).

The pandemic provides a new sense of urgency to reshape nationally focused, top-down siloed policy systems into collaborative and engaging structures within and across borders. New structures are being developed that can address viruses born in contexts of poverty and climate change and tackle inequality through national and global cooperation. Systems are needed that engage and work with all peoples for shared and equal futures. The Coalition of Global Health, Primary Care and Social Work Professionals is one of several catalysts in this change process. Others include the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), which

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this year launched international discussion on the need for a new eco-social contract that builds trust between governments and citizens and enables sustainable living (UNRISD, 2021). Other national and global developments are also moving in this direction. US President Joe Biden is pushing forward the concept of a holistic New Deal reflecting the successful approaches gained under the Roosevelt administration. Both New Deal strategies draw together a raft of interrelated policy objectives to maximize employment opportunities, build infrastructure, advance technology, reinforce workers' rights and lift public health and social wellbeing. Biden has extended this by integrating additional goals on sustainability, green energy, increasing educational opportunities for all citizens and expanding childcare.

## MOVING FORWARD AS A 'TEAM OF NINE BILLION'

'Co-building a new eco-social world: leaving no one behind' is the vision for the team of nine billion (estimated world population by 2050). The challenge for us all is to bring everyone's voice to the task of reducing health and social protection inequalities, the recognition of human and environmental rights, new deals, and new social contracts to create new global values together. This will require the social work profession to co-facilitate with all the other actors, opportunities to expand these conversations into every community to shape global values to create social justice and sustainability. This journey will continue with the global People's Summit in June 2022. The summit is being co-facilitated by IFSW and will bring together local and global perspectives for change on what values the world needs as it emerges out of the COVID-19 pandemic (IFSW, 2021c).

These developments are built on the positive responses of some of the social workers replying to the ethical challenges survey reported earlier in the article. In particular, they draw on their desire to learn both from their negative experiences of working during the pandemic and from the creativity unleashed by the need to rethink what counts as ethical practice and how to achieve this logistically. If the sense of solidarity created by COVID-19 can survive and develop, this would re-position social workers as allies and fellow citizens, where decisions are not their's alone, but co-produced together with people using services and other professionals.

The developments have taken place in the context of the pandemic. From the initial ethical challenges that frontline social workers faced a resurgence took place across the global profession. The essential role of social workers was examined. The need for all members of society, and the world, to work together to control the virus was revealed. This led to the IFSW adopting 'Ubuntu: I am because we are' as a central slogan to highlight the 'we' instead of 'us and them' paradigm.

The theme Ubuntu also challenges the global profession by reflecting that Western models of social work, and their ethical underpinnings, can be interpreted as being complicit with the individualistic structures that many of us work within. Today the global social work profession is calling for and acting to achieve new configurations of ethical values that build trust, security and sustainability for all.

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