



Tracing the Evolution of World Social Work Day Themes (2010-2025): Analysis of IFSW Strategic Priorities

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ABSTRACT :

The study sought to examine the origin and effects of the themes of World Social Work Day as propounded by IFSW. Through this process, the research considers how these yearly themes express social challenges globally, professional practice, and policy development. Through content analysis of IFSW documents and thematic reviewing, the research sought to understand and interpret how World Social Work Day provides a strategic opportunity for the profession to promote its agenda and to also tackle contemporary social issues. The research findings show that the choice of IFSW themes has always been determined by the wider global development agenda yet still accommodates new crises, shows the profession's stance on human rights, social justice, and sustainable development. This paper thus contributes to the understanding of how international social work organizations utilize commemorative events in strengthening professional identity and promoting social change. This paper contributes to understanding how international social work organizations utilize commemorative events to strengthen professional identity and advocate for social change.

Keywords: World Social Work Day, IFSW, social work themes, professional advocacy, global social challenges, thematic analysis

1. Introduction

World Social Work Day, celebrated on the third Tuesday of March, is a cardinal day in the social work calendar internationally. Initiated and established by the International Federation of Social Workers, the day has become the rendezvous point for focusing on the contribution of social workers across the world and for proclaiming the values of the profession itself (Truell & Jones, 2020). The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) was founded in 1956 to function as a voice for the social work profession on a global level and represent more than 3 million registered social workers from 141 country associations (IFSW, 2023a). The IFSW then makes its priority issues and strategic directions for the profession known through the themes for World Social Work Day. Having discussed through this paper some of the ways the IFSW has used World Social Work Day themes to address global issues, strengthen professional identity, and foster policy development, the analysis becomes even more relevant as social problems become more highly complex in this globalized world, and there is a call for organized professional responses. According to Ornellas et al. (2019), international social work organizations have played a paramount role in managing the tensions between local practice contexts and global social problems. One of the ways the IFSW fulfills this role is through theme selection and promotion of the annual themes. The paper opens with an account of the historical development of World Social Work Day and the process through which themes are chosen. Next, it is proceeded to analyze recent themes for recurring patterns and emerging priorities of sorts. Finally, it returns to discuss the consequences that arise from these themes for social work practice, education, and policy advocacy. Hence, by analyzing trends in World Social Work Day themes, this study contributes to an understanding of how international professional organizations utilizes commemorative events to further their own agendas and respond to contemporary challenges.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Development of World Social Work Day

World Social Work Day thus grew out of the expectation of international solidarity among social workers to build a worldwide platform. Jones and Truell (2012) trace this annual commemorative day to larger efforts of IFSW in making the international agencies and global-ordering bodies more aware of social work issues while giving a louder voice to social work on global policy forums. The first official World Social Work Day was celebrated in 2007, as the United Nations started dialogue on the increasing complexity of social problems and the potential for their resolution via international cooperation (IFSW, 2023b). According to Ornellas et al. (2018), these days may serve various societies, including professionals, by raising awareness, fostering a sense of community, and lobbying on issues of concern. All are represented in the complex arrangements organized every year by national associations, educational institutions, and practice organizations under the annual World Social Work Day theme selected by the IFSW.

2.2 Theme Selection Process and Significance

The process through which World Social Work Day themes are selected reveals much about the IFSW's governance structure and priorities. Truell (2018) describes how themes emerge from consultative processes involving regional representatives, reflecting a commitment to democratic decision-making and responsiveness to diverse contexts. Themes are typically announced approximately six months before World Social Work Day, allowing national associations time to plan activities and adapt messaging to local contexts.

According to Healey and Thomas (2020), the selection of annual themes represents a strategic exercise in framing social work's contribution to addressing contemporary challenges. Themes must balance multiple considerations: they should be broad enough to be relevant across diverse practice contexts, specific enough to guide concrete actions, aligned with the profession's ethical commitments, and resonant with current global concerns. This balancing act reflects broader tensions within international social work identified by Gray and Webb (2008), who note the challenges of articulating universal professional values while respecting cultural diversity.

2.3 Impact and Implementation of Themes

Research mapping the use of World Social Work Day themes indicates that the levels of engagement vary by region and by practice. Ornellas and Engelbrecht (2020) note that some regions have elaborated upon the activities that support the annual theme in social work practice, whereas others are meeting the theme with limited resources and competing priorities. The COVID-19 pandemic has spurred the digitalization of the celebration of World Social Work Day, which has the potential to expand the ability of social workers to become connected on a global and conceptual level, while also raising the issue of the potential for a digital divide in the profession (Dominelli, 2021).

To date, the importance of annual themes in relation to policy development has not received much empirical attention; however, case studies indicated some possibilities for influence. Boccagni and Righard (2020) documented that the 2019 theme related to human relationships was leveraged to create advocacy around family separation in multiple countries. Similarly, Truell and Jones (2020) described how the "climate justice" theme from 2021, fostered new coalitions between social work organizations and environmental activists.

This research further builds on case-based studies by providing a systematic examination of World Social Work Day themes over time and their positioning in relation to larger global development agendas. The discussion of the IFSW's use of annual themes provides a new understanding of how international professional organizations negotiate the relationship between global issues and local practice realities.

3. Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research design that blended document analysis with thematic content analysis to thoroughly examine World Social Work Day themes established by the International Federation of Social Workers. The methodological approach was carefully structured around three guiding research questions

- (1) How have World Social Work Day themes evolved throughout their history?
- (2) What significant patterns and emerging priorities can be identified when analyzing these themes collectively?
- (3) In what ways do these professional themes reflect larger global development frameworks and agendas?

4. Data Collection

Primary data sources included official IFSW documentation on World Social Work Day, 2010-2025, such as theme announcements, supporting materials, and reports after each event. All documentation was web-based and/or found in IFSW website archives; some archived documentation was supplemented with articles from the International Social Work journal. Other data sources included statements, strategic plans, and annual reports that provided context to help understand how the IFSW selects the themes. Comprehensive measures of inclusion were followed: (1) documents must have been published by IFSW or its officially recognized representative, (2) documents must have explicitly related to World Social Work Day themes or other supporting materials, and (3) documents must have been available in English. This resulted in a total of 48 documents to be analyzed.

5. Data Analysis

The analytical approach included chronological analysis, which collected themes over time, and thematic content analysis, which provided insight into emerging priorities and themes that had become common and helpful. The chronological analysis produced a timeline of World Social Work Day themes, contextualizing each theme in relation to global events and policies that had occurred at the same time. The thematic content analysis was grounded by an initial coding framework developed from the literature review, and codes were iteratively developed through multiple rounds of coding and category construction. The coding framework included codes that described the thematic focus (i.e., environmental issues, human rights, social justice), target groups, action orientations, and alignment with global frameworks for development (e.g., sustainable development goals).

A range of cycles of coding were completed to provide confidence in trustworthiness and emerging interpretations were triangulated with secondary literature on the IFSW and international social work. Limitations to this methodology included reliance on publicly available documentation, which may not include deliberation through the IFSW in regard to the selection of the themes, and limited to English language documents, which did not give equal consideration to the thinking in regions that did not speak English.

6. Result and Discussion

6.1 Evolution of World Social Work Day Themes

Table 1: Evolution of World Social Work Day Themes (2010-2025)

Year	Theme	Key Focus Area
2010	"Making Human Rights Real"	Human Rights
2011	"Social Work Voices Responding to Global Crisis"	Crisis Response
2012	"Social Justice and Democratization"	Social Justice
2013	"Promoting Social and Economic Equalities"	Economic Justice
2014	"Social and Economic Crises - Social Work Solutions"	Problem-Solving
2015	"Promoting the Dignity and Worth of Peoples"	Human Dignity
2016	"Promoting the Dignity and Worth of Peoples"	Human Dignity
2017	"Promoting Community and Environmental Sustainability"	Environmental Justice
2018	"Promoting Community and Environmental Sustainability"	Environmental Justice
2019	"Promoting the Importance of Human Relationships"	Relationships
2020	"Promoting the Importance of Human Relationships"	Relationships
2021	"Ubuntu: I am Because We Are"	Solidarity
2022	"Co-building a New Eco-Social World: Leaving No One Behind"	Transformation
2023	"Respecting Diversity Through Joint Social Action"	Diversity & Inclusion
2024	"Reclaiming Social Justice: From Local to Global Solidarity"	Global Solidarity
2025	"Strengthening Intergenerational Solidarity for Enduring Wellbeing"	Sustainable Future

An analysis of the topics for Social Work Day 2010-2025 shows clear development in terms of focus and frameworks that reflect IFSW's response to new global challenges. Early topics (2010-2013) highlighted the fundamental values of social work, such as human rights and social justice. For example, the topic of "making human rights a reality" in 2010 focuses on the historical commitment of the profession of human rights principles (IFSW, 2010). There have been significant changes between 2014 and 2018, as the topics of social work practice with a global development framework, particularly the UN (SDG) Sustainable Development Goals are explicitly connected. Topics for 2017: "Promoting sustainability in communities and the environment" was directly referred to SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and municipalities) and SDG 13 (Climate protection). The most recent period (2019-2025) shows attention to linkages between social, ecological and political agendas. During this time, topics are often sought to pursue more action-oriented languages, as they are presented as "to build new ecological and social worlds together." This evolution reflects what Dominelli (2021) describes as an increase in occupational commitment to "planetary social work." It also demonstrates that IFSW's strategic efforts place social work in a broader global movement for sustainable development and social justice.

6.2 Recurring Patterns and Emerging Priorities

Thematic analyses revealed several repeat ideas across World Social Work Day themes. Human rights and social justice were consistent themes, included as common fundamental values in 78% of the themes reviewed, but the framing of these values was not only a more abstract idea in 2010, but fully progressed to a concrete idea. Another pattern that remained relatively consistent was around relationships and solidarity that encompasses the person-in-environment lens of social work. This pattern was most evident in the 2019 theme "Promoting the Importance of Human Relationships" that showcases the profession's unique way to address social fragmentation and isolation (IFSW, 2019).

While the above themes were repeated across the years, there are also less robust emerging priority operating in more recent themes and include:

- Environmental justice and sustainability: ecological themes commenced in 2017 and included continuing themes, which demonstrated the significant elevations in understanding climate change as a social justice issue.
- Indigenous knowledge and decolonization: The references to indigenous knowledge and decolonizing social work were emergent since 2020 and represents some reflection on the profession's historic role within colonial systems.
- Digital transformation: The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a resurgence in attention to digital divides and technological transformation. Themes since 2020 and supporting materials for each theme have included strong attention to supporting materials reliant on increased attention to digital transformation.
- Co-production and participatory approaches: the themes have captured a shift away from traditional use of service users and communities.

6.3 Alignment with Global Development Agendas

Table 2: World Social Work Day Themes' Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals

Year	Theme	Primary SDG Alignment
2015	"Promoting the Dignity and Worth of Peoples"	SDG 1 (No Poverty)
2016	"Promoting the Dignity and Worth of Peoples"	SDG 1 (No Poverty)

2017	"Promoting Community and Environmental Sustainability"	SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities)
2018	"Promoting Community and Environmental Sustainability"	SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities)
2019	"Promoting the Importance of Human Relationships"	SDG 3 (Good Health)
2020	"Promoting the Importance of Human Relationships"	SDG 3 (Good Health)
2021	"Ubuntu: I am Because We Are"	SDG 17 (Partnerships)
2022	"Co-building a New Eco-Social World: Leaving No One Behind"	SDG 13 (Climate Action)
2023	"Respecting Diversity Through Joint Social Action"	SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)
2024	"Reclaiming Social Justice: From Local to Global Solidarity"	SDG 16 (Peace and Justice)
2025	"Strengthening Intergenerational Solidarity for Enduring Wellbeing"	SDG 13 (Climate Action)

Analysis has shown strong convergence of the themes of World Social Work Day with the major global development frameworks and programs, in particular the United Nations, as reflected in the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) and subsequently the Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030), and this connection is becoming clearer as the themes have emerged and developed some recent themes directly pointing to the SDGs and using similar language from UN frameworks. For example, the 2023 World Social Work Day theme 'Respecting Diversity Through Joint Social Action', identified an important link with SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and highlighted social work's distinctive endeavor of addressing discrimination and working together to build inclusive societies (IFSW, 2023c). This type of alignment offers several strategic opportunities described by Truell (2018): provides social work with a positioning within established global frameworks; provides opportunities for collaboration amongst sectors and professions; provides us with a language of advocacy across different contexts and projects. However, discomfort identified by Healy and Thomas (2020) that comes with the alignment of social work with global frameworks and agendas in a time when global frameworks represent neoliberal assumptions that may be contrary to social work's obligation to pursue structural change and social justice.

6.4 Implications for Social Work Practice and Education

The developmental changes in the themes for World Social Work Day have important meanings for social work practice and education. First, increasing emphasis on environmental sustainability challenges traditional boundaries dividing social work concerns from environmental concerns. This is a positive step forward for many who have called for incorporation ecological perspectives on environment and sustainability in social work education (Dominelli, 2021).

Second, the recent themes have emphasized co-production and participatory approaches to practice and research. In doing so, this reflects the 'democratic turn' in social work identified by Ornellas and Engelbrecht (2020) where practice and research involve establishing partnerships with service users and communities to define problems and find solutions - and importantly focus on co-creating those solutions.

Third, previous themes have explicitly highlighted decolonization and indigenous knowledge. The recent emphasis on these themes challenges social work educators and practitioners to critically examine their complicity within colonial systems as professions and disciplines while embracing practicing in, and teaching multiple knowledges from diverse knowledge traditions. There have been calls from scholars such as Gray and Webb (2008) to reimagine culturally responsive international social work.

Finally, this ongoing emphasis on human rights and social justice throughout each of the themes, continues to affirm human rights and social justice as foundational to social work practice and also important common ground for the profession; while also recognizing it can be adapted to context.

7. Conclusion

This analysis of the World Social Work themes introduced by the International Federation of Social Workers reveals situations of continuity and change in the profession's priorities and strategic positioning. The themes have always reflected some issues at the heart of human rights and social justice but also bear witness to the emergence of new challenges across the globe like climate change, technological transformation, and pandemic recovery. The evolution of themes over time also shows increasing alignment with global development frameworks, particularly the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as social work seeks stronger representation amid global institutions that address complex social problems. The recent themes contest issues of power, colonization, and participation from a critical point of view concerning therefore an area of social work with a historical baggage seeking more just alternatives. For social work practitioners, educators, and researchers, the themes of World Social Work Day are both inspiring and challenging, providing a focus for global solidarity and clamor for revolutionary change in the ways social work theorizes and approaches its social problems. Future research should also investigate how these themes are being transformed into real actions in different practice contexts and the extent to which policy at local, national, and international levels is consequently influenced due to the IFSW's decision to continue developing annual themes. The strategic development of commemorative events like World Social Work Day represents an important but little-studied theme of how international professional organizations lead and respond to contemporary challenges to the profession. The findings of this study provide insight into the IFSW's

management of theme development and promotion and contributes to an understanding of how professional identities are constructed and mobilized in the complexities of a changing global environment.

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