

Global Transitions: Implications for a Regional Social Work Agenda

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Whakarongo, whakarongo, whakarongo
Whakarongo ki te tangi a te manu,
Tui, tui, tui tuia
Tuia ki runga, Tuia ki raro
Tuia ki roto, Tuia ki waho
Ka rongo te po, ka rongo te ao
Ka rongo hoki te kawai tangata i heke mai i Hawaiki nui, Hawaiki roa, Hawaiki Pamamao
Ki te wheo ao, ki te ao marama.

The verse *Whakarongo, whakarongo whakarongo*, reminds us that we are all connected to a wider world; we are not isolated from our natural environment; instead there are close and enduring bonds between people, the land, and the sky, between night and day and between the spiritual and the material. And when the voyages from *Hawaiki nui, Hawaiki roa, Hawaiki pamamao* are recalled, there is recognition of distant shores from which journeys began and the common starting points that were home to the many peoples of Asia and the Pacific. Essentially the verse is an endorsement of the aim of this Conference: to create an opportunity for delegates across Asia and the Pacific to identify common ground and to unite under a mantle of collegiality, a shared vision, and a shared sense of place.

On September 30, 2009, as a result of a major earthquake in the Pacific, tidal waves, tsunami swamped parts of Samoa and Tonga and a typhoon swept across Saigon. The following day an earthquake of exceptional force left its mark on Padang in Sumatra. Together these events accounted for the loss of thousands of lives, wreaked havoc on buildings and whole villages, destroyed resources, left families homeless and destitute, and greatly aggravated already strained local and national economies.



Across the Pacific and into Asia there was an outpouring of both shock and disbelief as the extent of damage became apparent. The region was united in its grief and also the feelings of powerlessness in the face of such powerful forces of nature. Many Pacific people and Indonesians living in Australia and New Zealand were intimately caught up in the disasters and immediately set in train a set of actions to bring some relief to relatives and friends across the seas. And their concerns galvanised others, including governments and aid agencies to move quickly to reduce pain and suffering and restore normality. If there were an upside to the tsunami and the earthquakes it was the concerted response from across the region. Suddenly the vast stretches of ocean that separate the countries of Asia and the Pacific were reduced; distance gave way to affinity and difference took second place to humane concern.

Emerging from the destruction was the realization that the corner of the globe we know as East Asia and the South Pacific has a distinctive character and a set of commonalities. We share the same unstable tectonic plates, the same ocean currents, the same hurricanes and the same potential for cataclysmic events. In addition, and perhaps more significantly, the links between the countries of Asia and the Pacific have a history that extends back much further than September and October 2009. It now seems fairly certain that Pacific inhabitants entered the Pacific by way of Asia. Having originated in Africa they travelled through the Persian Gulf, into the Indian Ocean, landed on the west coast of India, spent time in Malaysia and Taiwan and then entered the Pacific Ocean through the east, arriving in Aotearoa New Zealand about a thousand years ago. The epic voyaging is recalled in fragments of modern culture: Maori and Malaysian vocabularies for example have many words in common such as *ikan*, (*ika*, fish), *dua* (*rua*, two), and *khabapai* (*kei te pai*, I am well).

In modern times, a regional identity has been strengthened by increasing economic interdependence. For many reasons Australia and New Zealand rely less on northern hemisphere markets and more on the markets of Asia. Moreover there is a two-way flow of travelers and migrants between countries, students are increasingly studying in other countries within the region and a corresponding cultural diversity is emerging. Auckland is now not only the city with the largest Maori population (over a quarter of all Maori live in the greater Auckland region) but it has a larger Pacific population than any other city in the world, and has assumed a strong Asian character. The main point I am making is that on the basis of a shared histories, connecting cultures, international travel, joint economies and exposure to similar climatic threats, there is justification for describing East Asia and the South Pacific as a well connected region.

By the same token, the challenges facing countries in the Asia Pacific region will increasingly be shared challenges. Global climate change, global overpopulation and global food shortages global inequalities, global colonization, and global

competitiveness will impact across the region demanding concerted responses and joint strategies. Impacts in the southern hemisphere will be different from those in northern countries and impacts on any one part of Asia Pacific will have consequences for other parts.

The Samoan and Tongan tsunami experiences, coupled with the Sumatra earthquake, are vivid reminders that no one part of the region will be immune from natural disasters, nor for that matter from economic fluctuations, epidemics, or demographic changes. Whether occurring in Thailand, Indonesia, Australia or Tonga, the ripples outwards will be felt in neighboring countries and on distant shores.

The 2008 global economic recession originated in the northern hemisphere but soon reached nations to the south and will continue to impact disproportionately on many states within the Asia Pacific region. It is also clear that global inequalities between rich nations and poor nations will become progressively more visible. Already over 130 million people live in extreme poverty and as a result many children will never reach adulthood. A rapidly growing world population coupled with a worldwide food shortage will greatly exacerbate the extent of their plight. Inequalities between nations is a global problem, impacting directly on Asian and Pacific nations and it is a problem that will of necessity involve New Zealand, Australia, and indeed all countries in the Asian-Pacific region.

In addition to global inequalities and widespread malnutrition, a further challenge will come from the effects of global climate change. There is now clear evidence that without nationwide agreements to reduce carbon emissions and revegetate denuded landscapes, the planet will be seriously compromised and as a consequence humanity will suffer. Not only will previously controlled diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis reappear, but global changes in climate will result in more cataclysmic events including droughts, cyclones, gales and floods leading to serious loss of life and property. The chances of some low-lying Pacific states disappearing completely are high and others will find the progressive encroachment of the sea on land masses an ever-present reminder of insecurity. As a developed nation New Zealand contributes disproportionately to global warming, but even greater impacts will come from those parts of the world where population densities are high. In any event unless there are collective agreements on strategies to reduce carbon emissions and move towards carbon neutrality, the survival of future generations in their ancestral homes will be doubtful.

Another challenge that will confront the region over the decades ahead has a double edge. Global colonization, a process already in train, brings with it entry to worldwide markets, international educational prospects, access to unprecedented volumes of knowledge and information, and exposure to the world's music, art and literature. The opportunities will be unlimited; though will not be without compromise. Increased globalization may mean that the customary ways of life in

countries across the Pacific and in Asia will be submerged by other customs and in the process cultural uniqueness will be transformed into a bland adaptation of a global norm. Language specialists are already predicting that up to 95 percent of the world's 7,000 languages are likely to become extinct by the end of the century. There is a real risk therefore that local distinctiveness will be lost to whatever global fashion holds dominance in the world at any particular time.

A consequence of overpopulation, limited resources, and global travel will be increased competition between nations. Super powers will compete for markets where there are large numbers of consumers and where there is access to scarce natural resources such as water, and renewable energies derived from the wind, tides, and waterways. Global competition will see a shift in world political alliances from west to east and from the northern hemisphere to the southern hemisphere. The global economic policy coordinating body the Group of 8 (G8), for example, has been replaced by the Group of 20 (G20) and whereas only one Asian Country, Japan, was in the G8 around one-half of G20 members are Asian states.

It may not be entirely clear how the challenges I have mentioned will be relevant to social workers. Financial recessions are frequently regarded as tasks for economists, and climate change is often delegated to scientists and politicians to manage. The reduction of global overpopulation might similarly be seen as a job for religious and political leaders or for firm state intervention. There might also be widespread expectation that agriculturalists and food technologists will take the lead in addressing food shortages.

But the scale of the challenges facing the region and the failure of groups working in isolation to make substantial gains, requires new approaches that are not handicapped by sectoral limitations or simplistic conclusions that one body of knowledge or one professional group has all the answers. Separating economic policies from social and environmental policies has been unhelpful and shortsighted. Expecting molecular scientists and economists to work in isolation of social scientists ignores the connections between people, the economy, and the environment. In that regard, the contribution of indigenous knowledge to environmental management and food production has been scarcely tested. Yet indigenous peoples have had first hand experiences with land and water for thousands of years and have developed systems of management that have been both sustainable and practical.

Global transitions that threaten the integrity of the planet must become part of a regional social work agenda. Social workers need to be part of the solution. The problems are too complex and too far reaching to imagine that answers can be fashioned from technological advances or economic wizardry alone.

While all states represented at this Conference have social work programs that address internal domestic priorities, a regional agenda for social work presupposes that there will be opportunity for interstate collaboration and the development of

cross-regional social work strategies. Social workers will continue to address local and domestic matters but in addition to 'business as usual' there must be a readiness to shift the focus so that a meaningful social work perspective is felt at a regional level and alongside other groups and professions.

SOCIAL WORK ENGAGEMENTS

In this respect it is possible to consider a regional agenda for social work. Bearing in mind the future regional threats arising from global climate change, global overpopulation, global inequalities, global colonization, and global competitiveness, it is imperative that social workers across the region are ready to actively engage with them. Regional strategies for eco-engagement, engagement with demographic transitions, economic engagement, border engagements, and collegial engagements will be increasingly important as the threats draw closer.

Eco-engagement is about reducing global warming and at the same time being ready to respond to catastrophic events such as tsunamis, hurricanes and droughts. As community leaders, policy makers, and family advisors, social workers are well placed to assume active roles as protectors of the environment and champions for reduced carbon emissions. The human face of climate change and the potential of families and communities to diminish carbon impacts fall well within the scope of social work. While carbon neutrality might seem a low priority to day to day involvement with drug abuse or access to adequate housing or recreational facilities for young people, all professionals have some responsibility to the planet and to the natural environment and social workers have much influence in local communities as well as in the formulation and implementation of social policies.

In the foreseeable future, however, it is highly likely that despite best efforts further regional disasters will occur. Eco-engagement is also about being ready to address the social needs that will inevitably accompany disasters. Disaster readiness requires a thorough knowledge of existing community strengths as well as knowledge about situations in neighboring countries. It is not unreasonable to expect that a disaster of serious magnitude in one country might be best managed by sending children and older people to another country in the region until normality is restored. Such a plan would necessitate close cooperation between workers in both countries and a capacity to respond quickly.

Unlike eco-engagement where the focus is on the relationship of people to their environment, demographic engagement is more concerned with population transitions – the impacts of a rapidly expanding world population and a rapidly aging population. Social workers can make major contributions to both trends. The finite resources of the planet are such that continuing population expansion is unsustainable and the case for more active family planning is gaining in strength. Community leaders will be pivotal to those discussions and must be ready to mediate between religious, cultural, economic,

and scientific perspectives. For many communities compulsory limits on family size will not be an acceptable answer to the world's population explosion, any more than euthanasia for the chronically sick or aged would be tolerable across the region. But it is abundantly clear that greater life expectancy coupled with reduced mortality rates will result in a population that is too large for this planet and social workers will inevitably be part of a nexus that must address the concern before it is too late.

Balancing population growth with the resources necessary for wellbeing will require greater attention to infrastructural regulations, governance and planning. An associated task and one that is already on social work agendas is linked to positive aging. In all developed countries, greater longevity has led to new ways of conceptualizing old age as well as the provision of a greater range of services. Meeting the needs of the well elderly and the not-so-well elderly will likely demand even more social work attention in the years ahead.

Inequalities between nations warrant social work intervention; engagement with economies is a priority for a regional social work agenda. Social workers and economists have often been on opposite sides of the debate, the one promoting quality of life and the other affordability. Both dimensions, however, are equally important and it makes little sense to address them as if they were separable entities. While finite resources and maldistribution of resources are parts of the same debate, they are seldom argued together. In this respect economic and social policies are inextricably bound by the twin pillars of want and need. Social workers cannot by themselves address modern economic complexities; but neither can economists. Joint efforts based on agreed common goals rather than philosophical differences will be essential if future recessions are to be avoided and economic growth is to become meaningful for all. Reducing inequalities between nations in the Asia Pacific region will present particular challenges. But they need not be insurmountable.

This Conference provides a platform for identifying starting points and aligning an agenda so that broad agreements might be forged and regional priorities for reducing inequalities agreed. Meanwhile the longstanding role of social workers as agents for the alleviation of poverty will continue and actions to reduce illiteracy will be a related goal.

Border engagements will be increasingly necessary as interstate migrations increase and global travel becomes a way of life. The trend has two dimensions. First, the collective opportunities across the world should be accessible to all countries in the region. Both technology and air travel have been able to shrink distance to the point where the world has become everyone's oyster. Secondary and tertiary education in other countries is already a reality and both New Zealand and Australia have regional reputations as educational exporters. A second dimension to globalization, however, has less attractive implications. There is the very real threat that local distinctiveness will give way to global mimicry.

Countries in the Asia Pacific Region will be driven as much by international brands as by their own traditions and in the process valuable heritage will be lost and the strength of diversity will be diminished. Social workers will be caught in both dimensions. On the one hand they will be expected to reduce barriers across borders so that travelers can move easily in two directions, but on the other they will be expected to defend local culture and local pride. The latter task will be especially important to indigenous communities many of whom have struggled to revitalize language, culture, and native leadership, only to see them again threatened by a new wave of colonizers – on-line as well as on the ground.

In response to global competitiveness, a movement towards collegial engagement might be led by social workers. Collegial engagement implies a readiness to work collaboratively across states so that social work practices can be focused on common priorities. But it also implies a readiness to work with other professional groups – economists, lawyers, health practitioners, environmentalists and teachers – and with other sectors. Approaching social and economic problems from sectoral perspectives, as if health, social welfare and economic and environmental sustainability could be considered in isolation, overlooks the realities within which families and communities live. Social workers are sufficiently aware of those realities to promote integrated delivery options that focus on best outcomes rather than provider positioning.

A REGIONAL SOCIAL WORK AGENDA

Delegates, I am grateful for the opportunity to share some views with you at the beginning of this Conference. Although you will each bring different perspectives that have evolved in your own countries and within your own traditions, as social workers working in this part of the global [region] you will also have much in common. The challenge will be to harness the collective knowledge and skills you bring so that the Asia Pacific Region can advance in a cooperative and integrated way in order to face the challenges ahead. That does not mean abandoning domestic priorities or disregarding cultural protocols at home, but it does mean actively promoting a level of regional awareness and ensuring that social work education can foster the development of skills that will be relevant to the wider region and to the future.

The main point I wanted to leave with you is that a regional social work agenda is needed. A focus on economic development alone, as a key to regional planning, runs the risk of ignoring the lives of real families and communities and reducing sustainability to a question of affordability and revenue. On the other hand, a strong united voice from the region's social workers will add balance and increase the chances that affordability will be matched with human dignity, cultural integrity, and social justice.

Essentially I have explored four key platforms relating to the broad themes of this Conference. The first platform is the region itself. Asia and the Pacific have unique characteristics. Not only is the region linked by the same unstable tectonic plates and atmospheric vagaries, but cultural similarities and DNA resemblances are reminders of ancient shared origins. And in modern times increasing migration between states and a growing Asia Pacific economy has added to the region's emergence as functionally distinctive part of the globe.

The second platform is about global shifts. The countries in Asia Pacific will be increasingly exposed to major global transitions that will impact disproportionately on the region. Global climate change, global over population, global inequalities, global colonization and global competitiveness will present new challenges that will demand cooperative region wide responses.

The third and fourth platforms are about social work engagement and social work actions. Engagements at macro-levels (social policy formulation) will contribute to broad regional policies while micro-engagements (social work actions) will strengthen families and communities as they move into the future. Eco-engagement – engaging with global climate change – will challenge social workers to develop programs and practices that reduce carbon emissions, while also being prepared for natural disasters that will inevitably recur across the Asia Pacific region. Engagement with overpopulation could encompass regional approaches to family planning but at a local level also address the social and economic consequences of an aging population. Inequalities between nations within the region require social workers to actively engage with national and regional economies. While working to alleviate the plight of those living in poverty will continue to be a major task for social workers, working with economists to develop sustainable economies where inequalities are eliminated will be even more pertinent.

So too will engagement with the impacts of global colonization have macro and micro opportunities. Social work engagements at borders can both facilitate policies for rationalized interstate migration and also protect local distinctiveness. Ensuring access to wider regional resources and facilities will bring advantages to many families in different countries within the region. At the same time social workers will have a major role to play by ensuring that regional migration is not at the expense of indigenous culture and resources. Balancing the two directions – interstate migration and cultural preservation – will present a number of dilemmas not the least of which will be comparing the gains made by opening up the region for regional exchanges against any loss of local distinctiveness or threats to national cultures.

Key to influencing future directions will be collegial engagement to counter the aggressive trend towards global competitiveness and western and northern hemisphere exploitation of Asia and the Pacific. Collegiality implies collaborating with social

workers in other parts of the region and also working with other professional and sectoral groups so that there is an integrated approach to social, economic, environmental, and cultural interventions.

On the basis of these four platforms a framework for a Regional Social Work Agenda can be constructed. The framework is built on the distinctiveness of the region, the impacts of global transitions, opportunities for social work engagement at a policy level, and social work actions at family and community levels (Table 1).

TABLE 1. A FRAMEWORK FOR A REGIONAL SOCIAL WORK AGENDA

Global Transitions	Social Work Engagements (Macro-interventions)	Social Work Actions (Micro-interventions)
Global climate change	Eco-engagement: policies that reduce carbon emissions	Energy sources that can be utilized by families and communities
Global overpopulation	Engagement with demographic transitions: policies that reduce the population explosion	Programs that address the needs of an aging population
Global inequalities	Engagement with economies: policies that reduce interstate disparities	Programs that alleviate poverty and illiteracy
Global colonization	Engagement at borders: policies that rationalize interstate migration	Programs that protect indigenous cultures and local distinctiveness
Global competitiveness	Collaborative engagement: policies that foster international social work collaboration	Programs that link social, economic, environmental, cultural interventions.
Regional Distinctiveness Shared natural environment Common cultures Interstate exchanges A regional economy		

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