

IFS Declaration on Social Justice

In September 2021, as the world continues to struggle with the Covid-19 pandemic, people from settlement houses and neighbourhood centres from around the world came together, in person and online, to strengthen and affirm our pursuit of social justice at the “Social Justice – The Unfinished Journey” conference of the International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres (IFS) in Sydney, Australia.

Social justice as a concept came about in the early nineteenth century during the industrial revolution in Europe and it sought to address growing inequality brought about by the capitalistic exploitation of labour. By the twentieth century the concept of social justice had evolved to include other aspects of social life including gender, race, the environment, and all manifestations of inequality between groups and individuals. The main principals of social justice include access to resources, participation, equity, and diversity within the framework of universal human rights.

IFS represents a global network of thousands of organizations as well as hundreds of thousands of active citizens, volunteers, students, and professionals in neighbourhoods of more than 30 countries across all global regions. IFS members embrace and champion these principals and have developed considerable skills and capacity to directly address these at a local level for more than a century. Our work concentrates on local, community development approaches based on authentic engagement and a commitment to local communities’ desire to self-determine.

IFS continues to provide a global network of local members to share and strengthen our common work towards social justice, human rights and stronger democracy. We represent and nurture the essential local voice to domestic and international civil society and governments.

The September 2015 New York high-level United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Summit saw 193 countries commit to the new development agenda “Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development” (SDGs). The SDGs represent a dramatic expansion of the superseded Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and they are comprised of 17 goals, 169 targets, and 230 indicators.¹ Not only do the goals allow states to measure their impact across 17 integrated and indivisible goals, they provide pathways to social justice through the recognition that an unaddressed measure in one location, affects everyone.

‘Sustainable Development’ is now part of common thought and language and the term is now synonymous with concepts of democracy, leaving the very idea of a ‘non-sustainable society’ as little different from a nondemocratic one.

Concepts of social justice and sustainable development are intrinsically intertwined, with sustainable development being the ideal vehicle to achieve social justice, however, neither is achievable without local community engagement and participation. Top-down social instruction has rarely been successful in generating positive change and while the concepts for measurement and categorisation have been developed at the international level, change will occur by those most affected, through participatory community collaboration.

The IFS and members are dedicated to broadcasting this local approach to the world, through all channels available, and actively seek the stories from these communities that can empower and encourage others to participate in their own communities.

We recognise that social justice will not be achieved without a shift of power imbalances across society. Communities need to lead and drive decision making for their areas. Settlement houses and neighbourhood centres play their vital role in giving people a voice, supporting and mobilising people and their communities who are excluded from decisions affecting them. Power structures that marginalise and minoritise communities need to be challenged and dismantled.

Settlement houses and neighbourhood centres around the globe naturally progress the SDGs and adopt the underpinning framework of social justice that seeks to steer humanity towards equality. We contribute to the positive outcomes of every SDG which are now more important than ever from a social justice perspective, as humanity pays the cost for an unequal world society seeking remission from a global pandemic.

We are aware of the challenges faced by communities around the world brought about by the flood of information and misinformation easily accessed via social media and the 'always on' nature of the internet. We are committed to communicating truth, equality and fairness in opposition to inequality, hatred and misinformation of any sort. We seek to broadcast our members' challenges and successes in advancing social justice and sustainable development around the world.

IFS members continue to empower local community efforts to support displaced people, and migrants generally, to retain dignity as they pursue their journey for freedom and human rights. We note the record of more than 800 million displaced persons worldwide.

We call on the governments and institutions of the world to support their local community development practitioners in developing and maintaining a just, sustainable community, free of hatred, inequality, injustice and fear. We seek unity from these organisations in pursuing humanity's goal of social justice in sustainable communities.

We declare that:

- Social Justice must remain a central focus for our global community alongside the defence of democracy and the pursuit of sustainable development. International collaboration, dialogue, promotion and sharing of local community stories that display the successes and challenges of local approaches to human rights, social justice and sustainable development are vital to this agenda and must be better supported and resourced.
- Local engagement based on community led development practice is essential to effectively addressing social justice and embedding sustainability. We commit to playing our part in highlighting power imbalances and work to rectify them within our own structures and influence for change more widely with our partners.
- Governments and institutions of the world need to continue and increase support for local community development agencies and practitioners and engage with these regional, national and global networks.

- Increasing isolation and narrow nationalism is dangerous and undermines any progress towards universal human rights. IFS is committed to practising and promoting international solidarity as the effective response to this threat.
- IFS members and the local communities we work with unequivocally support the UN Sustainability Development Goals as a vital, measurable and comparable framework for sustainable development that can bring about social justice.
- We, the members of the International Federation of Settlements, accept and embrace the complexity and interconnectedness of social justice and sustainable development and that any deficiency that gives rise to any one of the 17 SDGs requires universal action.
- We commit to playing our part in highlighting power imbalances and working to rectify them within our own structures, and influence for change more widely with our partners.