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News and Views...from IFSW: Renewed global interest in the profession

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NEWS AND VIEWS . . . from IFSW

Renewed global interest in the profession

Across the globe, the experience of IFSW in mid-2007 is that there is a renewed political and economic interest in social work and that the profession is increasingly seen as offering solutions to difficult social problems. This reality was evident in the level of interest in World Social Work Day on 27 March 2007. It takes some time for this reality to filter through to frontline social workers, who typically still feel unappreciated and besieged. IFSW activity in the year between global conferences tends to focus on regional activity, which this year illustrates the importance placed on social work, while also reflecting frustrations felt by practitioners. In 2007 these elements have already been seen in conferences in Parma (Italy) and Kampala (Uganda). The conference in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) and the meeting of Latin American associations in Foz do Iguazu (Brazil) are still to happen as I write.

The European conference in March 2007 was a highly successful partnership between IFSW, the European Association of Schools of Social Work (EASSW) (European schools), FESET (schools for social pedagogues) and the Italian associations. Over 700 participants took part and the event was over-subscribed. 'Social Work 2007: Social Change and Social Professions' explored three topical themes, namely, family and individuality, diversity and integration, and managerialism from state to market. The IFSW Europe General Meeting, linked to the conference, attracted 23 countries in debate for two and a half days. A new European Executive was elected including members from Denmark, Germany, Malta, Russia, Portugal and Croatia. The new Honorary Secretary, Siobhan Maclean, took over and she is already established as a contact point for European member organizations (europe@ifsw.org). The

2005–7 Social Cohesion Project involved 30 member organizations and was finalized in Parma, with the outcome published in July 2007 as the IFSW Europe ‘Statement on Social Work: Promoting Social Cohesion in Europe’. IFSW is a founder member of the new European Network on Social Action (ENSACT), chaired by Hans van Ewijk, which also includes EASSW and the International Council of Social Welfare (ICSW) Europe, among others. ENSACT is sponsoring the 2009 European conference to be held in Croatia.

The 2007 African conference, held in May in Kampala, was entitled ‘Designing Remedies to Poverty’. The conference was opened by Syda Bbumba, Minister of Gender, Labour and Social Development, who committed the Ugandan government to introducing a social work law to recognize and regulate social work. IFSW Africa is campaigning for social work regulation laws in all countries. The conference included a day symposium sponsored by the International Criminal Court (ICC). This discussed the history of the ICC and its significance in humanity’s search for justice and peace, and explored how social workers can support people to use the court. This was a stimulating exploration of the practical relationship between human rights and social work practice.

There is significant evidence of a resurgence of social work in Africa, with more communication between national member organizations, a greater awareness of IFSW activity and strengthened collaboration between national associations, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil-society organizations (CSOs). Links with ICSW and the African Association of Schools of Social Work (AASSW) are already strong and developing. IFSW had been very vibrant 20 years ago in Africa but had gone into a decline, which is now being reversed. The formerly active organizations are showing new interest (Egypt, Libya, South Africa) and the president for Africa will be speaking at a conference in Libya. A number of other African organizations have expressed an interest in IFSW. IFSW is accredited to UN Habitat, based in Nairobi (which is very interested in what social workers can do as key development partners) and has undertaken a Habitat-sponsored project arising out of conflict in slums. The feedback suggested that no other group could have done the research required and IFSW is being asked to propose more projects: ‘We do not need to push on the door as it is already open.’

The Latin American region is preparing to host the 2008 world conference in Brazil. This should help raise the profile of IFSW in the region. Few countries are members and many who are members

are not active. There is close working with ALAEITS (representing regional schools of social work), which has recently been reformed, and the possibility of joint work between it and IFSW is on the agenda. IFSW is very involved in social work in the Mercosur region. IFSW regional funds are being used to support a meeting of presidents of national associations in November in Brazil, which will be attended by the global president. There is evidence of a significant rebirth of social work as a profession in the region. The IFSW Executive Committee wants to have more IFSW documents and webpages in Spanish and will explore ways to achieve this. A number of Caribbean countries are also showing interest in becoming members.

The Asia-Pacific regional meeting is being held in Malaysia in August 2007, focusing on disaster management, including learning from the IFSW/COSW/FAST project in response to the tsunami floods. Several countries are showing renewed interest in IFSW membership, including Vietnam, which was recently visited by the regional president. The rapid growth in numbers of social workers qualifying in China is not being matched by an increase in jobs, which is creating unemployment and tensions. Discussions are under way about the formation of an Indian national grouping to make it possible for that country to join IFSW.

World Executive Meeting and 2010

The World Executive met in Luzern in July and set up a strategic development group to develop a plan to support the growth and development of the federation. Work is going ahead fast on the 2010 joint conference (with IASSW and ICSW) in Hong Kong. The three partners have agreed that the conference will be preceded by a challenge to member organizations to engage in work on the social agenda to feed into the conference and to help lay the foundation for the social agenda for the following decade. The new Policy, Advocacy and Representation Commission has mapped out an ambitious programme of policy review and development.

The volume of activity and the reported confidence of social workers is heartening and an antidote to those who see only problems and constraints. IFSW is determined to support national member organizations to promote the positive outcomes of social work and the value of the profession.

David N. Jones
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