

THE TWELFTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF SOCIAL WORK

ATHENS SEPTEMBER 13-19th, 1964

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If it has not already been done, social scientists will one day prepare a list of cities ranked according to their suitability as conference centres. Where, I wonder, will Athens be placed? In the week of the thirteenth to nineteenth September the city was too beautiful and the weather too fine for it to be an ideal setting for a convention. The Acropolis glistened above the white houses of the Plaka, the blue sea sparkled under a cloudless sky, and the weather so warm that the whole populace, including the delegates, had a siesta from midday until five in the afternoon.

People have lived in Athens since approximately 3000 BC, it has been occupied many times and attacked even more, but I am sure the heroes of Marathon stirred in their tumulus when over 2000 social workers invaded the city. According to one official estimate 66 countries were represented and 26 international organisations. The Pre-Conference Working Party had reports from 28 countries to digest. New Zealand, shared with ten others the doubtful distinction of being represented by one person; at the other end of the scale almost 400 came from the U.S.A. I was continually being questioned about conflict within my delegation and once, when standing alone at a coffee break, was charged with planning to lead all the New Zealand delegates to the beach. The internal conflict was more real than my tormentors realised. What can one man hope to cover in a conference of these dimensions.

The pattern of the Conference, as outlined in the programme, was as follows:

- (1) Pre-Conference Working Party - which will meet ahead of time to prepare a statement designed to clarify the ideas on which the Conference programme is based and thus serve as a guide to Conference discussions.
- (2) Plenary Sessions - at which highly qualified speakers will present the setting in which the theme is to be considered and major issues raised by the theme.
- (3) General Meetings - which will consist of presentations on topics related to the Conference theme by persons who are experts in particular fields, followed by an opportunity for questions from the audience.
- (4) Commissions - in which experts selected by National Committees will consider five basic questions related to the theme and prepare recommendations.
- (5) Study Groups - which will provide an opportunity for selected delegates to meet with others of common interests and exchange experience and knowledge on specialised topics within the general framework of the theme.
- (6) Consultation Meetings - at which various experts in various specialities will present brief statements with most of the time devoted to questions and discussions from the floor.
- (7) Meetings of Other Organisations - which are sessions sponsored by international voluntary agencies with interests in the social welfare field.
- (8) Films
- (9) Agency Visits.
- (10) Exhibits - provided by National Committees, Governments and International Organisations, illustrating social planning activities.

I had hoped it might be possible to move around and sample different aspects of the Conference but geographically and tactically this was difficult. Geographically because the sections were located in different parts of Athens, the only weakness in the superb organisation of our Greek hosts. At least five different places were used for meetings each about three or four miles from the other. Tactically because I found that you were expected to participate in the work of the Conference and I did not wish to leave the impression that New Zealanders avoided their responsibilities. As General Meetings, Commissions, and Study Groups met at the same time, and some other meetings also clashed, I was forced to choose one group and stick to it.

The selection was not easy as among the Study Groups were such titles as: Rural Development, Urban Development, Mobility and Migration Needs of Children and Youth, Housing, the Aged, the Role of Social Work Education, as well as some more general topics. I became a member of the Study Group on Mobility and Migration. In one sense it did not matter which group one attended as each was concerned with working through the general theme in a more specific setting.

The theme of the Conference was 'Social Progress through Social Planning - the Role of Social Work'. I have not the skill, nor do I expect have you the patience, to examine the variety of by-paths through which this topic led the delegates. Mr. Charles I Schottland (Dean, Florence Heller Graduate School for Advanced Studies in Social Welfare) has written an excellent paper summarising his impressions of the Conference and I propose to draw heavily on his findings in the following.

Not only were all the tongues of Babel represented at the Conference, but even for those speaking the same language, as far as I could gather, only the prepositions in the theme did not produce a variety of interpretations and semantic disputes. Schottland points out the distinctions were made, or were not made, between social work, social welfare, social service, and social action. Some said that 'social planning' did not translate easily into their language, and one country stated there was no equivalent of 'social planning' in its language either official or in general practice. One report, somewhat wryly claimed that, 'The vague and varying use of the word 'social' is an international Phenomenon'.

scientific study of the evolution of the meaning of words.

When one escaped the semantics and moved to the concepts involved, the result was only a little more encouraging. 'Social progress' tended to be identified with economic progress and, in a sense, the Conference consciously tried to avoid this tendency. The Working Party had advanced the idea that social progress contains at least five qualitative components - peace in freedom, extension of human rights, elimination of poverty, preservation of health, and promotion of education. Of these, perhaps because it is easier to quantify, the third was the most commonly used criterion of progress.

If social progress presented problems in conceptualising 'social planning' unlike the term 'economic planning' has no technical meaning. I did not feel the Conference made much progress with this concept. Schottland made the plea that social planning encompasses the idea that 'man may, by his deliberate action, shape or influence or change his social institutions and social environment'. I think the Conference failed to come to terms with social planning as distinct from the social implications of physical or economic planning. It is true that Conference endorsed the view that economic, physical, and social planning need to be integrated or co-ordinated. It also deplored the many cases in which social aspects have been ignored in planning with disastrous effects on human relationships and social institutions.

In general the Conference recognised the need for social planning but also the absence of any organisations devoted to such planning. There was some suggestion the International Conference of Social Work should set up an international advisory body on social planning; while the Mexican National Report, recognising the importance of the social services in social planning, recommended the establishment of a 'Permanent International Committee of Social Service Planning'.

All were agreed that whatever social planning might be, social workers should play a bigger part in it. It was argued that where planning involved human welfare, social workers should participate in all stages of the planning, from advising Ministers to field work practice. They were entitled to such involvement, it was claimed, not only because of their experience with people, but also because if putting the plan into operation produced social and personal disorganisation social workers would be expected to deal with the resultant problems.

Schottland summarised the contributions it was thought social workers could make to social planning. You may find it of interest to have these reported in his own words.

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1. Social welfare's concern for people. It is true that all professions have a concern for people, but social welfare has developed practices, techniques, and institutions which translate this concern into practical operating programmes.
2. Social welfare's understanding of the impact of broad social planning on individuals, families, and communities. Social welfare and social workers are in the firing line. They see the impact of programmes and plans on the daily activities of individuals and communities.
3. Many social workers and welfare personnel are experienced in the type of community organisation and community development processes so essential to the mobilisation of community resources to achieve proposed social objectives.
4. Social workers have learned the importance of relating planning to the culture of the groups affected. One of the failures of any new programmes may be traced to the socio-cultural orientation of the planners which was different from that of many groups affected by such programmes.
5. Social welfare can assess the social implications of economic development. We in the social welfare field have come to possess, through our knowledge of human needs and our understanding of human behaviour, an appreciation of the impact of economic change on the social fabric of a community, its meaning for family life, and its affects on the individual.
6. We know that economic progress can create many social problems if preventive measures are not taken. Social welfare can, through its experience in working with these problems, assist in plans to prevent them or minimise the disruptions of rapid economic change.
7. Social welfare has developed methods of citizen participation. To the extent that such participation is necessary, desirable, and possible, social welfare agencies and social workers can assist in achieving it.
8. Social welfare can assist in identifying, promoting and protecting social values in the social planning process.
9. Social welfare has learned to participate in social and political action which is irrevocably tied to social planning, because the major planning is governmental and therefore involved in the political process.

As could be imagined an important part of most discussions concerned the extent to which welfare personnel are adequately trained for their work as social planners. Some emphasised the need for the training of social workers to understand 'political forces and processes', and one Commission recommended that the International Schools of Social Work be informed of the urgent need for increased training efforts for social work personnel for planning functions.

In one form or another the various groups discussed these points. The group to which I belonged restricted its discussion to mobility and migration. The procedure we adopted probably typified the others and was briefly as follows. We split into two language groups, French and English, each person choosing the group in which he felt linguistically most comfortable. As usual I felt shamed by several Europeans who were equally facile with either language.

The discussion was based, initially, on a paper prepared by the chairman. Almost from the beginning we deserted general issues for particular problems. Each was asked to explain briefly the nature of services to help migrants in his own country and social planning quickly became identified with legislative enactments and agency practice. The tendency was to discuss the social worker as a unit in the administrative structure designed to deal with migrants. Our findings, therefore, were basically concerned with ways in which social workers could influence legislators and establish services to meet the migrants needs which their experience told them existed.

Undoubtably some of the group could not participate as they would have wished because of language difficulty, but language was far from being the biggest stumbling block to communication. It quickly became evident that the Australians, North Americans, and the New Zealander had a

different concept of migration from that of the Europeans (including the British). For the first group, migrants were included in the pioneer concept of 'settlers' who were destined to become part of the receiving community: for the Europeans, the migrant worker was the person they were talking about, an individual who would not only remain a foreigner in his country of residence but who would eventually need rehabilitation in his own society. Other participants tended to follow one or other of the above, e.g. South Americans had rather the European view, Israelis the other.

I mention this merely to highlight the cultural conceptual differences which I felt were present in every phase of the Conference. So intimately is social welfare related to the culture in which it is operative that cross cultural communication presents more difficulty at a social work conference than any other international meeting. On the other hand the Conference has reinforced what I already believed, social work cannot grow healthily in isolation. However difficult, cross cultural fertilisation is necessary. If I were to draw a single recommendation for my experience at the Social Work Conference it would be that we investigate ways and means of increasing our contacts with workers of other countries. By this suggestion I do not mean importing experts, which certainly has its place, but rather to try and facilitate the face-to-face contact between workers who are doing the same sort of job in different countries.

There is little to report of a business nature. I attended a meeting of the International Federation of Social Workers. The New Zealand Association was admitted to membership with acclamation and I conveyed your fraternal greetings to the other member countries. The discussion of this meeting can be summarised as follows. Social work as a profession is growing but not rapidly enough or equally in all countries. Although salaries are not all important, every effort should be made to keep these at a high level because, in most countries, financial status is regarded as indicating professional status. Although professionalism would be helped by legal recognition (eg licensing), resolving conflicts in our professional self image, and strong active associations, the surest way to achieve a professional standing is by demonstrated competence on the job.

I would like to thank the association for helping me to attend this Conference, not only did I have the honour of being your representative but also I benefitted considerably, as a person, from the experience.

The XIIIth International Conference of Social Work will be held in Washington, D.C., the topic will be 'Urbanisation', the dates September 3rd. to 9th. 1966.

This report would not be complete without some reference to the social side of the Conference. No praise can be too high for the effort our Greek hosts put into the organisation of the Conference. The opening session took place in the magnificent Herodes Atticus Theatre, where, under the deepening evening sky, we sat in the huge amphitheatre and were welcomed by H.R.H. Princess Irene of the Hellenes, the Mayor of Athens, and the Minister of Social Welfare. Later in the evening, at the Stadium, in which a whole block had been reserved, we attended a folk festival honouring the marriage of King Constantine. A royal reception was given to the heads of delegations and Princess Irene again acted for the Royal Family. The whole New Zealand delegation was present and found the Princess charming with a lively interest in our country. All delegates were invited to a wine festival at Daphni where people wandered about with vine leaves (plastic) in their hair, sipping free wine (real) which was being dispensed by the growers. It was there I met most of the sixteen strong Australian delegation. I had been asked to join their party and went looking for them. From the depth of a crowd around a barrel I heard a voice saying, 'Grab a bottle of plonk mate and follow me'. The Australians were found.

We were also entertained at the Herodes Atticus Theatre to a performance of Aristophanes' Peace. There is a peculiar magic in seeing a classical Greek play in its own setting with the moon supplementing modern spot lights. The fact I couldn't understand a word didn't seem to matter. In addition to such large scale entertainment Greek Hosts invited us, in small groups, to their homes. I am sure we all felt that the Greeks gave so graciously that we only realised afterwards how much we had received from them. Although one cannot claim that King Constantine's marriage was arranged specially for our benefit we joined with all Athens in its festive celebration. The day following both we and the city felt a sense of emptiness. The city because the fairy story quality of a royal marriage had vanished and we because our conference, with all its contentions and friendships, had come to an end.