

Cooperating with ICSW, 1994 – 2003

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The ICSW had a vital role in the struggle for integration of social and economic policies in the 1990s and early 2000s. It is worth recalling those battles because of their formative influence and also because of their contemporary relevance.

After Prime Minister Thatcher and President Reagan adopted market fundamentalism as the ideological core of their economic strategies and the World Bank and IMF copied them, there were major consequences for people everywhere who relied on government social services. The availability and quality of health services, education and even public infrastructure were undermined to make way for reduced taxation for high income earners. A centrally important goal of social justice and human wellbeing became achieving rigorous balance between economic and social goals.

President Mitterrand proposed that the UN hold a global conference to plan an international strategy aimed at fighting poverty, creating productive employment and strengthening social integration. The Danish Government offered to host the conference to be held in March 1995. As the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development begins by saying:

For the first time in history, at the invitation of the United Nations, we gather as heads of State and Government to recognise the significance of social development and human wellbeing for all and to give to these goals the highest priority both now and into the twenty-first century.

Preparation for this summit created opportunities in many countries for the member organisations of the ICSW to intensify their national advocacy and lift it to a global level. For example, in Australia the Labor Government established a national committee to prepare for the World Summit for Social Development (WSSD), and Julian Disney the President of the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), the Australian member of the ICSW, was appointed a member. The committee actively prepared and won government support for its proposals. As committee Chair I attended the UN 1994 Preparatory Conferences and so did Julian Disney, who was also President of ICSW.

We had been allies much earlier. When the Australian Labor Party was elected to government in 1983, I represented Prime Minister Bob Hawke in the Planning Committee for a national economic summit. This was envisaged to be a tripartite event, (like the composition of the ILO), with the Governments (Federal and State), employer and union representatives participating. Bob Hawke's goals for the summit were to build a national consensus for increasing employment, strengthening the economy and reducing poverty. A key component was a national incomes policy which had already been negotiated between the Labor Party and the union movement.

However, to ensure that there was effective articulation of the needs of low income earners it was vital that the ACOSS President also be a participant rather than just an observer, like other community groups. After substantial debate, this was agreed and so Disney sat in the House of Representatives Chamber, where the summit was held, with the Premiers, employers and unionists. The summit was a great success because it endorsed the statement by the New South Wales state Premier who had argued that there were three priorities for Australia at that moment – employment, employment and employment.

During the Preparatory Meetings for the World Summit a decade later, during 1994 (which like most UN conferences were held in public) there were great debates about substantial issues. As usual there were significant differences of opinion and proposed policy *between* the wealthy countries – Europe and North America – and the developing countries,

but also *within* those groups, depending on their political positions. There was vigorous formal and informal debate about to what extent the neo-liberalism of the US, UK, Bank and Fund should be directly criticised, and what alternative strategy and policy should be advocated.

ICSW played a major role in the informal discussions. Disney wrote and advocated a comprehensive, radical document proposing major international and national reforms. His suggestions went beyond those being proposed by even the most progressive countries. He was a highly effective public speaker and presented his ideas at so-called side events. These were held within the UN building sometimes simultaneously with the formal Preparatory meeting, sometimes at lunch time or during breaks in official proceedings. These events significantly influenced the political climate of the Preparatory sessions. They reinforced the centrality of issues such as poverty, unemployment and social disintegration which were being discussed. A particular difficulty of these discussions was that most of the national representatives were diplomats, many of whom had little knowledge of the debates about policy which were taking place. One of ICSW's contributions was in providing educational and informal opportunities for delegates to expand their knowledge.

Some of the ICSW proposals won support from some governments. Australia was a member of the Summit Bureau, the 12 member executive of Member States, representative of all regions, who had responsibility for overseeing the Summit's planning and preparation. Two memorable proposals which were both planned and advocated by ICSW and the Australian committee and which were significantly debated, were about the balance of macroeconomic policy and about setting a target for poverty reduction.

The balance between the goals of growth of employment and price stability was a major macroeconomic issue at that time. The World Bank and the IMF were advocating that governments give priority to controlling inflation by contractionary cuts to public services. The effect of these policies was also to reduce employment and the rate of economic growth and to undermine services. The alliance of progressive countries and outspoken NGOs like the ICSW persuaded the Summit to adopt a section of the Copenhagen Declaration which called on countries to place 'the creation 'of employment at the centre of national strategies and policies ... [and] to expand work opportunities'. (Para 47)

Similarly, there was fierce debate about whether to recommend that countries adopt poverty reduction goals, and it was only at the end of the final Prepcom that there was majority agreement to recommend that 'Governments should give greater focus to public efforts to eradicate absolute poverty and to reduce overall poverty substantially by ... formulating or strengthening, preferably by 1996, and implementing national poverty eradication plans to ... establish, within each national context, strategies and affordable time-bound goals and targets for the substantial reduction of overall poverty and the eradication of absolute poverty.' (Para 6) Governments had naturally been reluctant to be expected to set themselves time-bound goals for something as difficult as poverty reduction. However, again shared advocacy had been effective.

In June 2000 a five-year follow-up conference was held, a Special Session of the UN General Assembly, this time hosted by Switzerland in Geneva. The Division of which I was Director had responsibility for the substantive preparation for the conference. The purpose of this Twenty-fourth Special Session of the GA was to review progress with implementation since the Social Summit, and to identify additional policies. Julian Disney, representing ICSW, was again fully involved.

The results were highly significant. The conference was attended by over 5000 people of whom over 2000 were delegates from 160 countries mostly led by ministers but 19 by heads of State or Government. While these delegation heads were speaking during the five days, or attending the outstanding Geneva Forum, their colleagues were completing negotiation of the Geneva Declaration. This Declaration includes a ringing political statement

on the centrality of more equitable, socially just and people-centred societies; an assessment of what had happened since the Copenhagen Social Summit five years ago; and about 160 paragraphs on new initiatives. Thanks in part to urging by ICSW, the quality and extensiveness of the Geneva Forum was a major improvement on the 'side-events' organised at the Social Summit. A second major improvement in the participation of NGOs was that three of their leaders spoke to a formal session of the General Assembly. This was an extremely rare event as the General Assembly is equivalent to a national parliament and only officially elected members are normally allowed to speak. Julian Disney was one of these speakers.

There was agreement for the first time on a global target for poverty reduction, of halving the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015. This was implicitly understood to at least include all those with incomes of less than a dollar a day of whom there were estimated to be about 1200 million. A decision to begin a more integrated global campaign to reduce poverty was taken. Preparation of an international employment strategy by the ILO was to begin with the holding of a global employment forum in the following year.

There were about forty substantial, fresh initiatives or new international agreements for action in the Declaration. These included: recognition that achievement of the agreed target of access to basic education for all by 2015 would cost around \$8 billion a year; a call for all UN agencies to integrate health policies more effectively into their programmes in other areas; action through trade agreements and increased incentives for research to improve access of developing countries to affordable and effective pharmaceuticals; strengthened commitment to basic workers' rights, and to social protection for the vulnerable; and recommendations for national targets and major new action to reduce infection rates for HIV/AIDS. After extensive debate there was agreement on the importance of 'positive or affirmative action' to achieve gender equality. Corporate social responsibility was added to the international agenda for the first time.

The relationship of civil society to official international events and activities can be a source of frustration to the International NGO leaders. They do not have automatic participation let alone speaking rights. These are reserved for official representatives of national states. However the degree of the acceptance of INGOs, the extent of their informal participation and the extent of their political weight and influence have all substantially increased. This is, of course, in part because major INGOs can have striking electoral impacts through the excellence of their national lobbying in domestic political systems and their extensive networks. ICSW is one of the longest established INGOs, the effectiveness of whose work has led to this evolution. There is now a widespread reaction against the doctrinaire rigidities of neo-liberalism, but there is an urgent need for the vitality of campaigns for work for all, equity, inclusiveness, justice and peace to be strengthened.

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