

ICSW AND THE WORLD SUMMIT ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, 1994-95

By 1988, when I first became involved with ICSW, the environment in which it sought to help improve human wellbeing around the world had changed very considerably since its foundation some sixty years earlier. Within the social welfare movement itself, a growing number of people were emphasising the importance of proactive and preventive action to address the underlying causes of hardship, often referred to as “social development”. They saw it as an essential companion to the more traditional but less transformative “social welfare” focus on remedial and palliative action.

The importance of the so-called “social development” approach was heightened by economic policies at both national and international levels becoming increasingly dominated from the early 1980s by the priorities and vagaries of financial markets. In high-income “developed” countries, this tended to weaken the more equitable and far-sighted combination of economic and social policies adopted by many governments in the aftermaths of the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the Second World War.

The impact was even greater in other countries (many being developing countries that had been recently decolonised) which lacked sufficient resources and strong democratic governance to protect and promote their interests internationally, especially the wellbeing of their most disadvantaged citizens. ICSW members from these countries were often strongly committed to the “development” approach, which they believed should include changes to the structures and policies of key global bodies such as the UN, World Bank, IMF and WTO and to the amount and terms of the financial assistance provided to developing countries by wealthier countries.

ICSW sought to reconcile internal differences on this issue in the mid-1980s by retaining its traditional title but adding as a kind of sub-title: “A World Organisation promoting Social Development”. Despite having elected its first World Presidents from the “south” (Hong Kong and Thailand), however, it is fair to say that at the end of the 1980s ICSW remained an overwhelmingly “northern” and “welfare” orientated organisation.

The challenge for ICSW to find an appropriate and widely-supported role in these circumstances was heightened by the growth at national and international levels of “specialist” civil society organisations within the broader welfare sector (for example, in relation to disability, older people and women). The same applied to the growth of “southern” organisations that focused heavily on the “development” approach and

often lacked the resources or willingness to be active participants in global organisations like ICSW.

By 1992, when Dirk Jarré from Germany became ICW President, ICSW was at a low ebb. It had to reduce the biennial global conference in 1990 to an unofficial status as a protest against the government of the host country, Morocco, refusing to admit Israeli registrants. In 1992, the conference had to be cancelled when the proposed American host committee could not raise sufficient funding.

A somewhat beleaguered group of ICSW leaders met in Washington DC to discuss options for regeneration. It was there that Pierre Dionne of Canada told us of the likelihood that the United Nations would convene a World Summit for Social Development in 1995. Pierre emphasised the broad scope of the proposed Summit and the expectation of substantial opportunities for NGO involvement.

The Washington meeting agreed to establish a Global Working Group to prepare and oversee our involvement in the Summit. It included two members from each of our five regions and was chaired by myself. This early start on Summit preparation was of great subsequent benefit.

The new President, Dirk Jarré, and myself were especially enthusiastic about the Summit's proposed inclusion of "development" issues such as governance structures and economic policy which fell within the scope of what the Summit process later described as an "enabling environment" for social development. We saw this is as highly necessary to resist and reverse some of the damaging trends of the previous twenty years or so.

We also thought the Summit would provided a crucial opportunity to demonstrate the value of a generalist organisation like ICSW contributing on these core underlying issues that were unlikely to be a key focus of more specialised welfare-orientated organisations but were of great interest to many of our current or potential members from "southern" countries. This shared perspective was the beginning of a very harmonious and, I believe, productive partnership between Dirk Jarré and myself during the eight years spanning our respective terms as ICSW President.

Dirk led the adoption of a new ICSW Mission Statement mandating increased emphasis on action-orientated social development. This approach was reaffirmed in the "Tampere Manifesto" adopted at the next meeting of ICSW's governing body, then called the Committee of Representatives (CoRep), in July 1994.

ICSW's active engagement with the Summit preparatory process began by initiating, in partnership with the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), a regular *NGO Newsletter* to promote awareness and involvement in the Summit preparations and distributing more than 15,000 copies of *Summit Fact Sheets* in three languages. These and our other Summit initiatives were financially assisted by the Finnish and Canadian governments, as well as the UN itself.

In February 1994 the UN convened in New York the first of its three scheduled Preparatory Committee meetings (Prepcoms) for the World Summit for Social Development, which was to be held in Copenhagen in March 1995. At this and following Prepcoms ICSW was represented by a team of 8-10 people drawn from our members around the world and led by Dirk Jarré and myself.

In cooperation with ICVA, we organised a preliminary meeting for all NGO participants at the first Prepcom, convened "side events" with influential governmental and NGO speakers, widely distributed a succinct two-page summary of ten proposed priorities for the Summit as well as other papers about policy and process issues, and began to engage individually with key UN, government and NGO leaders.

ICSW and ICVA actively facilitated cooperation between NGOs to promote synergies and avoid unnecessary duplication or disagreement. We distributed a collation of proposals made by the various NGOs actively participating in the Summit process. This commitment to widespread engagement with other NGOs as well as our own ICSW members became a cornerstone of our approach to the Summit and in the following years.

In July 1994, a few months after the first Prepcom, ICSW's biennial global conference in Finland included a number of presentations and discussions relevant to the Summit. It was followed in the same month by two broadly-based NGO forums which we convened in Helsinki and Bangkok to focus solely on Summit preparation. The Helsinki forum, involving eighty participants from around the world, was addressed by the progenitor and Chair of the Summit, Chilean Ambassador Juan Somavia.

Guided by CoRep decisions and the two NGO forums, the ICSW working group then further developed the summary of priorities which it had presented to the first Prepcom. The outcome was presented prominently at the second Prepcom in August 1994 in a ten-page ICSW document entitled "Some Options for the [Summit] Declaration and the Programme of Action" and in two speeches to plenary Prepcom

sessions in which our President Dirk Jarré outlined “ICSW’s Top Ten Priorities for the Social Development Summit”.

These priorities reflected ICSW’s view that the Summit should help to initiate substantial changes in the international economic framework which, by its profound influence on patterns of business activity and on the budgetary and other constraints on national governments, had a very great impact on the incidence of poverty and inequality throughout the world. Then, as now, this applied especially to aspects of the international financial markets, lending to less developed countries, tax competition, and the behaviour of transnational corporations.

We argued that these issues were too often being left in the hands of intergovernmental organisations and processes that were dominated by economists with a very narrow approach to development and by the most powerful countries which tended to favour their own interests. The Summit provided a unique opportunity to redress the situation to some extent.

ICSW took the view that at a global Summit it was best to focus our specific proposals on global and, to some extent, regional policies rather than on national policies that would have to be very vaguely expressed in order to make consensus possible at the Summit and not be manifestly inappropriate for the wide range of different national circumstances.

This view was strengthened by our belief that the Summit should focus on a limited number of high priority and specific agreements rather than, as is unfortunately common in the UN system, be satisfied with a lengthy compendium of vague, mutually inconsistent or manifestly unrealistic promises. Our approach sought specific improvements in existing international structures and processes, wherever appropriate, rather than mere promises to hold post-Summit discussions about abstract and rather vague concepts.

One of ICSW’s key priorities was to strengthen the composition, powers and methods of the UN’s Economic and Social Council to counter-balance the narrow and inequitable economic ideology of the IMF and World Bank’s so-called “Washington Consensus”. This included the possibility of ECOSOC overseeing negotiation of a General Agreement on Social Standards in relation to matters such as poverty, health, education and housing and a General Agreement on Tax to reform policies which were creating undue levels of debt, speculative investment and tax avoidance. It also included ECOSOC strengthening implementation and monitoring of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,

the existing benchmark target for wealthy countries to provide the equivalent of 0.7% of their GDP as financial assistance to developing countries and the new Human Development Index of countries' relative progress in human wellbeing.

As our experience of Prepcoms grew, we came to realise that engaging on informal and individual discussions with key UN and government representatives tended to be more useful than listening to lengthy and formal government statements being read in plenary sessions. We did speak on a number of occasions at full Prepcom sessions but, unlike many other NGOs, believed that sustained advocacy with key governments in the margins of the main meeting was more likely to be influential.

ICSW's work was greatly assisted by several of our team and associates being NGO members of key government delegations. In the case of Australia, this included being able to attend the official meetings of the Bureau which was chaired by Ambassador Somavia and responsible for overall management of the Summit preparations. We also benefited from the presence of ICSW members from across the world to help refine and implement our advocacy, especially to the representatives of their own governments.

In these and other discussions, ICSW argued repeatedly that the Summit agreement should be a succinct and specific document, perhaps not more than about 30 pages, so that inclusion of a policy proposal might signal that it was a high priority and genuine commitment rather than just part of an almost endless "wish list". We focused closely on the drafts under consideration at Prepcoms, proposing specific wording for amendments through the almost daily two-page updates we circulated to all countries and NGOs who took part in the informal consultations.

Our relationships with the Summit Chair and his Deputy Chairs from Australia (Richard Butler) and the Netherlands (Koos Richelle) were close and constructive. In this and many other ways we benefited greatly from the irrepressibly creative energy of ICSW's Director of Communications, Lilian Chatterjee.

ICSW had considerable influence on proposals put to the Prepcom by various governments and UN agencies. At the end of the second Prepcom, when the Chair proposed 45 items in his "Elements for a Draft Declaration and Programme of Action", almost one-third were expressed in identical terms to ICSW proposals. A further one-third reflected views put by ICSW and other NGOs.

We failed in the herculean task of persuading a UN Summit to produce a succinct and specific final agreement. But we had considerable influence on the first section of the Programme of Action which focused on the underlying causes of the poverty,

unemployment and other hardships that were described in the subsequent three sections, and on the fifth section which proposed specific international and regional responses to those causes. This included strengthening the emphasis on boosting ECOSOC and international tax cooperation, and the critique of neo-liberalism. Our impact was aided by our drafting suggestions attracting the attention of UN leaders who after the second Prepcom recruited one of the ICSW team to re-draft the text of the Summit Declaration and much of the Programme before the documents were presented for negotiation at the next Prepcom.

By the time of the Summit itself, there was little scope for NGOs to influence the wording of the agreements. The UN's member states had the last word in that regard. Most of the huge numbers of NGO representatives and other people who attended in Copenhagen had joined the process too late to have any effect. However, ICSW took advantage of the large gathering to convene a conference on the way ahead after the Summit and specific follow-up proposals. The governmental speakers at our conference included the President of Guyana and Cabinet-level ministers from Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Poland and South Africa. Addressing a full session of the Summit, Dirk Jarré expressed our satisfaction with a number of its outcomes but also said that we had hoped for “more advanced concepts, stronger commitments and more concrete target lines and dates”.

In light of the UN's subsequent adoption of the Millennium Development Goals, it is notable that two months after the Summit we published seven specific policy priorities for further action which included the UN selecting “ten specific targets to which priority should be given ... during the Decade for the Eradication of Poverty. This ‘top ten’ should be selected from the range of targets concerning basic human needs for food, health, shelter and education that have been adopted by various international meetings in recent years”.

Speaking in Montreal six months after the Summit, Ambassador Somavia described ICSW as having been one of the three most influential NGO participants in the process. He added that he often gave ICSW as “an example of the spaces and the potential available within the UN system when the work is done professionally with political savvy and capacity to understand the dealing and wheeling of the system.”

The Summit process substantially strengthened ICSW's profile and reputation in the minds of many leading governments, the UN bureaucracy and a wide range of NGOs working on social welfare and social development. This proved highly beneficial over the following five years as we continued to advocate vigorously for Summit

implementation, to prepare for the UN review of progress to be held in 2000, and to strengthen ICSW itself, especially at the regional level. Our achievements and challenges during that period will be the subject of a subsequent article.

Julian Disney

29 January 2019