



INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON SOCIAL WELFARE

NORTH AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN REGION NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2020—PART 2



What options do we have? Lessons from the past, openings for the future

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Despite the avalanche of information about the COVID-19 this global medical emergency brings a lot of questions yet to be answered. And that is quite understandable: the loss of life is huge, the adverse impact on the world economy is already beyond doubt, and large-scale negative consequences for employment and social welfare are being felt everywhere. The picture be-

comes even more complicated if we add that the nature of the virus is not that clear, while vaccines—the only proven way out in the fight against this disaster—are only at the initial stages of their development and may be months away from becoming available if we add the time required for clinical trials. The worst may be over, at least in some countries, but it is too early to cheer: despite the easing of lockdowns and the opening of stores, the pandemic is far from over. The coronavirus crisis has caused major upheavals for welfare systems around the world.

At least 4.5 billion people—about half of the world’s population – have been living under social distancing measures. And the IMF has already estimated the economic fallout, indicating that one hundred and seventy countries are going to finish this year with smaller economies and with an



increased burden of debt, bigger deficits and more unemployment. The pandemic that has besieged cities and communities around the world has exposed weaknesses in social protection and health systems in a glaring manner.

The scale of the crisis is such that it requires some urgent policy re-

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Our Mission

In keeping with the mission set forth by the International Council of Social Welfare, the U.S. Council is committed to the advancement of social development, social welfare and social justice. Our priorities include subjects such as food insecurity and improving the nutrition of children and the elderly, reducing poverty, improving education and promoting affordable house. The U.S. Council is also involved in issues relating to economic development, both in the U.S. and around the world, social justice and encouraging community participation.

sponses from civil society organizations like the ICSW dealing with social development. We should try to define our role under these exceptional circumstances, and not only for today but more so for tomorrow. Here I am presenting my personal views based on my many years of work in international organizations, globally and in the field. I do hope that my proposals might engender some discussion from within about our role, bringing valuable insights and recommendations to members. I see here both strategic and tactical elements, and what follows below is my input into a potential discussion.

To start the ball rolling, the organization should create an inventory of the best practices in every region that identifies successful examples of Government and NGO interventions dealing with the crisis, and make them well-known to our global audience. Even small steps should not be overlooked but used for cross-fertilization. While the existing capacity of the members should definitely be a point of departure for any further action, the ICSW might also explore new features of the capacity-building process aimed at addressing the consequences of the pandemics.

In this context the ongoing digitalization, which has proven to be such an important asset for many members during the crisis, could be further enhanced. The use of digital technology has accelerated new ways of working and connecting with each other, and even eased some obvious strains. Such new tools as webinars and online conferences could become important feature of the ICSW's future activities, saving time and money spent on travel. New ways of communication could make the work of the organization more targeted, focused and relevant, making it at the same time more visible.

However, digital technologies should not be seen as a panacea for development policy, it is just a tool. The socio-economic and political environments in which the projects are conceived and taking place should not be overlooked. There are reports about very obvious existing risks in this area regarding safety and even abuse of personal data, and not just for consumers but for population at large, particularly in developing countries. The opportunities for increased surveillance and behavioral control using biometric databases might be quite real and should be counteracted by strengthening civil society. Capacity development aimed at preventing abuse in this sphere and deepening rights of citizenship might become essential. The COVID crisis is a huge calamity, but it also provides opportunities for new people-centered actions and opens new windows for addressing existing weaknesses. The ICSW's collective action in this direction counts but what specific features digitalization might assume should be

discussed.

It is important to note that the priority theme of the next 59th session of the United Nations Commission for Social Development (CSocD) in 2021 will be "Socially just transition towards sustainable development: the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all". The Commission is mandated to address emerging concerns and new cross-cutting socio-economic issues in the context of evolving global development challenges. The ICSW has a consultative status with UN ECOSOC, using opportunities provided by this status to submit both written and oral statements during the CSocD annual sessions. In such a way we used to articulate the concerns of ICSW members to the global audience, and proposing meaningful solutions.

Given that the ICSW deals with important but "big" themes, there is also a need to revisit our key proclaimed goals and fine-tune them to the demands of the moment. The ICSW was established as an international non-governmental organization operating throughout the world and championing the cause of social welfare, social justice and social development. We need to discuss what each of these noble aspirations may mean now in practical terms, and how "to unpack" them. The priorities defined nationally and regionally should be identified, taking into account current rapid changes in the policy environment.

We do not know how the world will look after COVID-19 -- the greatest global shock in many years -- but some issues we are confronting today will definitely stay with us tomorrow. Our organization needs to seek answers now, making trade-offs and choices, as they may shape the future. For example, inequality within and between nations is one of the greatest existing challenges, and the ICSW has been keen in confronting it over the years in consistent advocacy campaigns aimed at the reduction of inequality. We may need to draw attention to the negative consequences of inequality in the context of the pandemics, recognizing its long-lasting impact. The virus crisis has vividly demonstrated how debilitating the fallout of inequality was for marginalized groups. In this context the ICSW should uphold its quest for fairness-- it must stay relevant when we articulate policy priorities regionally and globally.

The ICSW cannot, of course, avoid the environmental dimension. Many international organizations and numerous observers admit that the loss of employment and income will cause further damage to livelihoods, health, and sustainable development. The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals must remain a crucial framework for civil society activities. Poverty eradication and the quest for justice are closely linked to any progress on the environmental front, but every organization should try to find its own place within this framework, reflecting national aspirations and priorities. Again, cross-fertilization and relevant capacity-building could be helpful here.

We need to discuss the role of volunteers and social workers in fighting the crisis, as that role was truly indispensable in many countries. The bravery of medical personnel and health workers generally became widely admired around the world. This crisis offers an opportunity to work more closely with our partners, the ICSW's sister organizations—IASSW and IFSW. Their capacity could be helpful in augmenting our own efforts.

The impact of the pandemics on the poorest has been particularly devastating, with loss of income and livelihoods for many people. And we must raise-- and try to find convincing answers to -- some crucial pending questions. These answers are important for ICSW policy-making now and in the future. Some examples: How could the ICSW use its conventional means of advocacy to help vulnerable people? Who are the most vulnerable now that merit well-targeted support? How can resilience be built more effectively? Why is universalism important when we discuss social protection schemes? How can we improve the lot of our target groups, such the elderly, people with disabilities, poor families with children? What could be done to help elderly people, whose particular vulnerability to crisis became evident almost from the beginning? How could a child care crisis be tackled, given that a potential return to “normalcy” may upset a fragile balance between parents’ ability to juggle child care with working from home? We may need to identify some immediate crises facing families and communities and help address them using all available or even potential means at hand.

All these questions need to be discussed, if we wish to move from slogans to effective policy measures that are helpful at the grass-roots level.

Promoting social protection is one of the ICSW's established policy goals. In many countries such schemes have proven to be invaluable during the virus crisis, saving livelihoods and even lives. However, we must discuss some specifics in the lessons learned, and compare these results regionally. In order to move further, such schemes should be revisited and sometimes strengthened, given the experience of the COVID-19 crisis. The ICSW should be bold in its advocacy and not be afraid of controversial issues. What was controversial yesterday, or even today, may become quite acceptable tomorrow.

One example of such issues is a Universal Basic Income (UBI). It is a controversial issue, but it might be a very important entry point for discussing the economic impacts of the coronavirus. The ICSW has supported discussions on this issue before, even at the international level, as shown in the ICSW statements to the UN Commission for Social Development. We could return to this advocacy point, given its significance in addressing the impact of the

crisis in many national settings. For example, in the UK the recent paper from the Institute of Economic Affairs affirms that the government's furlough scheme, which is paying the wages of employees of privately owned companies, strengthens the case for a form of UBI. Similar approaches are being considered in other countries. The ICSW may contribute to the discussion on non-contributory transfer programmes such as UBI using our experience on the ground.

Looking back to the history of our organization, we see examples of daring, pioneering efforts on the part of many visionaries who tried innovative responses to the existing challenges of the times. These leaders should be inspiration to us. Just some historical examples suffice: at our earliest phase, when the organization was called the International Conference on Social Work, the great social innovator and first ICSW Secretary- General, the Belgian doctor *René Sand*, was a pioneer in an integrated approach to medicine and medical studies, seeing social work and social science inputs as crucial for doctors. Another example—in the 80s of the past century the ICSW was during its conferences at the forefront of engendering discussions with national committees regarding new approaches to social welfare and the availability of social services. In the 90s the ICSW was keen to endorse comprehensive social policies, emphasizing an integrated, rather than a sectoral perspective on social development, and that was crucial for the preparation of the World Summit for Social Development and for the follow-up process. There are other well-recognized examples of that kind—from promoting the advantages of regional social policies and best regional practices to the social protection floor initiative, which the ICSW has been actively promoting, working effectively with many partners at all levels. Intellectual creativity and knowledge-based initiatives used to be ICSW trademarks, and without doubt they may be equally important under the circumstances of the COVID-19 era.

The exit from the quarantine phenomenon, which has been experienced by so many countries almost simultaneously, will not be easy. Normal life has changed, the daily routine has changed, and there are numerous uncertainties ahead. Commentators of all stripes, including printed and electronic media, and of course social media networks—are all trying to grasp the multiple consequences of the pandemics. The new possibilities for worldwide communications facilitate the observation of the real time experiences of people living in other countries, making comparisons and mutual learning possible. The ICSW should not lag behind in discussing the *pros* and *cons* of some specific ways out of quarantines and lockdowns.

The budget priorities of the social sectors will probably



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have to be re-assessed in all countries, and some already strained budgets may become even more strained, given the drastic changes in the world of work. How should the new financial constraints be addressed? What does civil society have to offer? The mobilization of resources is crucial, and it must be approached as a no nonsense task,

if we wish to achieve success in addressing the consequences of the pandemic. The ICSW should do its best to galvanize the joint efforts of members in this direction, and do it equitably and effectively.

Last but not least – the ICSW and its members may wish to create regional and global road maps to answer the key question -- how we

can help our members to cope with the present situation, how we could increase our institutional impact, bringing the decision-makers on board. And these “maps” should be very specific in responding to the existing challenge: how to make the organization relevant and more inclusive under the circumstances.

1 <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/04/07/sp040920-SMs2020-Curtain-Raiser>

2 See: Sven Hilbig. **Digitalisation's mixed development record. Does digitalisation drive future-proof development for the Global South? A closer look fuels doubt about too much optimism**, International Politics and Society, Berlin, 12 June 2020, accessed https://www.ips-journal.eu/index.php?id=344&L=0&tx_news_pi1%5Bnews%5D=4423&tx_news_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&tx_news_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=en_793_20200612&cHash=91102e3323a64cd3e6da07885b509b00

3 World Economic Forum. *The coronavirus pandemic could push half a billion people into poverty*. Accessed at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-pandemic-half-a-billion-people-into-poverty/>

Link to NACSW Convention

<https://www.nacsw.org/annual-convention/>

Link to ICSW Global Newsletter

<https://www.icsw.org/index.php/publications/icsw-global-newsletter>

Link to IFSW Webinar

<https://www.ifsw.org/global-trends-in-mental-health-first-ever-commonwealth-social-work-webinar-series-27-29-july-2020/>

Link to IASSW & ICSW Joint World Conference

<http://www.swesd2020.org/>

Link to ICSW NEA Webinar on COVID-19

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScilafaAH79fq6WgK4B6PoVdLW8xMELZeYVYrFng3l2y2U0w/viewform>

IMPORTANT DATES

- July 27-29, 2020 First Ever Commonwealth Social Work Webinar Series 'Global Trends in Mental Health' Hosted by International Federation of Social Work
- July 29, 2020 ICSW North East Asia Regional Webinar on COVID-19: Welfare Challenges and Response
- November 5-8, 2020 Rimini, Italy— IASSW and ICSW Joint World Conference
- November 5-8, 2020 Washington, DC NACSW 'Unity in the Face of Adversity: Building a World of Love and Justice'