

Towards 2028

By Christian Rollet

As we all know, ICSW has a long history : the conference held in Paris in 1928 on « social services » is the starting point of our life. My wife, Catherine Rollet and myself, together with Christiane Nantois-Pigeon have written a brochure on 80 years of ICSW which has been given to the participants at the Tours conference in 2008. Many references has been given to the authors by Denys Correll who was ED at thta time. You can read it on our website, in English or in French. And this work has been updated by Sergeï Zelenev for this meeting.

This is why I don't think it is very useful to deliver a purely historical speech.

From the past, I just wish to underline a few points.

First, we have a large scope, much larger than social work. The first conference was devoted to social services at large. And IASSW and IFSW has progressively built their own organization while we moved to be a « social welfare » global NGO. In 1928, every country brought to the discussion a national report on social policy which had been elaborated by the national member. It was a kind of « macro-social » approach, including of course social work, social work education, social service provision...

Secondly, we are among the very first civil society organization to be accredited by the UN system and other international organizations as ILO, WHO, UNICEF...This gives us a specific role in the global debates on social policies. « Act locally, think globally » : we are part of the global thinking...

To come to the 30 last years of our history, I have to stress the importance for us of the 1995 Copenhagen summit on social development. It is a peak in our global influence. We have been given a key role in the participation of civil society to the summit and we had a high visibility among all NGOs involved in social issues. At the same time, we had money to play our role : just a dream ! For instance, we could publish a quarterly journal, « social development review ». I brought with me two issues of this journal : the first one, August 1996, just after the Copenhagen conference, when Dirk Jarré was global president, and one of the last one, june 2004, when Solveig Askjem took over the presidency.

Very soon after Copenhagen, the MDGs raised at the very top of the global agenda and many financial and economic issues appeared as priorities. The golden time for us came to an end and money flew away...Of course, it is not so simple. MDGs had also a social content, but rather as a second rank target, and money did not come back. Fortunately, ILO, through the R202 helped the international community to make a step forwards by promoting universal basic social floors : the consequences of the 2008 economical crisis and the growing inequalities can explain why social issues show up again.

After more than 15 years of participation to the life of ICSW, at different levels (national president, global treasurer, global president, regional president), I think it is time to send a few messages. I hope it could help the following team to reach 2028 safely...

We are a global thinking civil society organization in the field of social issues and social development. It may look like an abstraction, but it is our true identity, our « DNA », built through a rich history. We may be proud of it. Of course, this does not mean we are living in a protected area far from the day to day life...We have national members and each of them « shall have a broadly based membership of organizations » (article 5 of the Constitution). This network of national members gives us a permanent connection with the real life, a spring of field knowledge. It is our common responsibility to activate a living movement of « bottom up » and « top down » process of information. This way, our global thinking is not abstraction but connection with local actors.

As a consequence, at global and regional level, we need a tool to be influent, and at a time when money is lacking, publishing newsletters is the best way. We need to reach key persons outside our membership, as politicians, international organizations civil servants, journalists, activists...and to provide high level analysis and viewpoints by well known leaders. This is why the scientific standard of our Newsletters is very crucial.

One of our assets also is our strong network of global experts through out the world. We have to make it active, to stimulate it, to enlarge it. The creation of « E » members is a good innovation, and I am happy to belong to this category...In the same line, in the regions, similar networks could be launched.

My second message deals with our « field ». I want to come back to the beginning. And maybe I could make a proposal regarding the joint conferences.

We are clearly committed to social work, and many among our national members have closed connections with schools of social work or professional organizations of social workers, and this is just positive. But, as clearly, we have a larger scope. Our centers of interest, from the very beginning are sticked to social policy at large. Service providers, policy makers, managers, activists...among many others are important parts of our membership. We have to merge a diversity of approaches, and this is as well part of our « DNA ».

Then I can come to my proposal.

I feel our global joint conferences as big and successfull events ; At the same time, I feel somewhat unhappy. Our conferences has become (maybe because of the success in terms of participation) too much analytic, too focused on « micro » experiences or analysis : it appears to be a nice collection of thousands of interesting but limited papers ; we are more and more sharing the model of a scientific disciplinary conference. I think we should promote « macro » approaches, cross cutting debates, « meta » analysis, comparative studies, interdisciplinary discussions. We need absolutely time for debates, rather than time for successive « monologues ».

I know it is easy to say...I know also you need to give participants an opportunity to speak, and when rejecting an abstract you take the risk of loosing a registration. But, we need to have a positive perspective : any potential participant should say he will come because of the level of the debate, the interactivity of the sessions, the unique opportunity to learn from each other, rather than because his own contribution has been accepted.

I can make a suggestion (driven from my experience of a highly scientific international organization). To stimulate high level discussion, the organizers takes the initiative of having a plenary the following way : a controversial issue is selected by the scientific committee ; a question is asked (very simply so that you are invited to say yes or no, even if it is too schematic) ; two famous speakers are invited to open the discussion, one is answering « yes », the other « no » and they speak 20 to 30 minutes each ; then the floor is given to the audience : those who want to speak are invited

to queue separately, either for « yes » or for « no » and they have the microphone alternatively for one or two minutes. It works, I can tell you, even among experts !

My last message, but not least, is about management. I know how hard are the times, and I want to be modest, and above all to avoid judging anyone.

For practical reasons, and also for financial ones, more and more meetings are using IT : skype, teleconferences or whatever...There is a lack of face to face relationship. My experience of such meetings is that the information sharing is low because of technical problems (bad sound, breakdowns, parasites...), language misunderstandings (and as a francophone, I can tell it is very important) and confusion (many people speaking together)...This is why we need to check the output of these meetings by a written document (collecting only decisions) ; we often forget to do it and it is a weakness for the implementation of the decisions.

To make the « bottom up » and « top down » process as smooth as possible, we need also to organize a sharing information system, using electronic means mainly. Once again, it is important to take into account the question of the translation from english to any useful other language. We use to underestimate the question. As it is a financial matter, volunteers are welcome... Sharing information can be the purpose of internal newsletters, very different from the previous ones : short, frequent, easy to read, informative...

It is impossible not to say a word on financial matters. I don't have any miraculous solution ! I just think we have to try again to raise new funds. Public funding is now quite out of reach, but we may use the many opportunities of attending high level meetings as accredited NGO, which we do already of course. Building experts research networks could be a growing possibility in the coming years. Through the global initiative, we could push the idea of a global report on SPFs ; there is a stake : we know some NGOs have built their reputation on issuing a yearly striking document. And, why not addressing private sector, either social economy or truly private foundations. The social corporate responsibility should be tested... Why not proposing an exploration of this way to young students of schools of management ?

We have a long history which deserts to be known and we may be proud of it. I am aware of the hard time we are leaving in a world where social welfare is often seen as a negative word.

Let us keep and improve our assets by reference to our core values based on our rich historical experience : to reach 2028, we first need a strong team building capacity. Long life to ICSW !