

News from our societies – ICSW: Building a better world

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Challenging times can also be exciting times, and challenges have always been a strong stimulus for creativity and innovation. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the weaknesses of our welfare systems. It has obliged us to react in a titanic effort to design new vaccines, and in an equally titanic effort to strengthen our healthcare, social services, and support systems in a lock-downed society and economy. At the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), an organization spanning almost one hundred years of history, we know that an especially important pillar underpinning the legitimacy of welfare systems rests on the visibility of social problems, on the visibility of poverty, and on the visibility of their effects. The global pandemic has compelled us to seek a global response and more effective and cohesive welfare systems, whose good practices can be replicated in other contexts, while respecting and protecting diversity and human rights. More than ever, the pandemic has shown that these priorities need to be on the public agenda if we are to strengthen the social welfare of all people.

For at least the last 150 years, concern for social welfare, and the scientific tackling of poverty and inequality in industrial and post-industrial societies, has generated an array of helping professions, public and private institutions, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as ours, the ICSW. Social work is part of this collective effort, based on science, to improve the living conditions of our fellow citizens. It is grounded in a long-established theoretical and epistemological body of knowledge and a permanent call to action. As a profession informed by praxis and concerned with the social and human dimensions of the vicissitudes of daily life, social work (as well as other helping professions) aims to transform reality by putting itself at the service of people. Through this epistemic framework of human rights, social work attempts to understand and reflexively address historical circumstances by means of a dialectical logic. As such, social work is not free of controversy, especially with respect to the social order instituted in tension with the administrations, institutions, and individuals responsible for its management, thus giving rise to an intersection between critical engagement and the coercive forces of the established norms and systems of social organization.

Given this framework, those of us who dedicate ourselves to the profession – in any of its various spheres – have been witness to certain paradoxes and conflicts. For example, we are not mere processors, but we process resources; and because of our critical commitment, we are not mere instruments of the public administration, although we often form part of it. Throughout these processes, it is important to bear in mind historically constructed balances and tensions: social intervention is a form of assistance but also of control, and social action is transformative but also a question of adaptation and assimilation. Even so, if the object of helping professions is the person-in-situation, that is, the person situated in a given context and at a given time characterized by multiple social dimensions, the challenge of our time is to address the effects of digitalization in an already digital environment. Today, both public administrations and companies, or citizens in their work and leisure life, are immersed in social networks, either as users or as avid consumers of information and communication technologies (ICTs). It is precisely in this environment where social work must respond to the complex challenges and problems that arise.

At the same time, the Sustainable Development Goals, which have to be achieved in digital societies, present us with a set of goals that guide our action, both as NGOs and as professions linked to social welfare. The old challenges are being redefined and have to be faced in a collaborative new way. In the first 9 months of this year 2021, within our agenda of activities, we have to highlight the international seminars on *The role of ICTs for social inclusion and social welfare* (May 2021), which can be consulted on our website (www.icsw.org). And the recent ICSW International Conference 2021: *Addressing food insecurity in Africa: Strategies for ensuring child-sensitive social protection*, 9 September 2021, in which we have addressed from different perspectives a key issue for social welfare: food security. At the end of the year, we are working on another international conference with the title *Preparing for the post COVID-19 era: Towards universal social protection* to discuss the ways for the social welfare community to respond and take action in the new era of COVID-19.

I would like to highlight some conclusions of the seminar *The role of ICTs for social inclusion and social welfare*. The purpose of our international seminar was to explore a key phenomenon that has been accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis, the digitalization of our societies, as well as one of its effects: the need to design inclusive social policies in a digital environment. Without digitalization there can be no inclusion, and the digitalization model we are implementing in our welfare systems will have lasting consequences. Digitalization represents a collective, global challenge that will redefine the relationships between users, professionals, and the administrations or companies that provide welfare services. All the interventions are available on our website: www.icsw.org.

Related to the conference *Addressing food insecurity in Africa: Strategies for ensuring child-sensitive social protection*, I want to highlight some results of our public debate. Recognized as a multifaceted challenge, food security is high on the political and socio-economic agendas of many countries. The conference explored a wealth of issues on child-sensitive social protection in the context of efforts aimed at fighting food insecurity in Africa and at highlighting different national perspectives and policy responses. The effective targeting of these responses to ensure that they meet the needs of all, especially the poorest and most marginalized – and, among these groups, children in particular – remains a challenge. In this sense, as the participants in the conference highlighted, child-sensitive social protection requires, among other actions, specific programme design and interventions, accessing links between poverty and malnutrition, emphasis on the gendered nature of poverty as well as on the size and frequency of cash transfers together with non-cash and in-kind interventions and support. All the interventions are available on our website: www.icsw.org.

Putting the welfare discussion on the public agenda in an innovative and effective way is a basic objective for ICSW. From a collaborative perspective, giving voice to the various actors, we want to offer society a complementary point of view based on human rights and social welfare. The results of the conferences we have organized this year will also be published as collective books. And I am pleased to be able to share with all *International Social Work* (ISW) readers that the book with the papers of the international conference we held in May 2021 (*ICSW International Seminar: The role of ICTs for social inclusion and social welfare*) will be published in 2021 by Routledge Publishing House, after passing the external evaluation process of the publisher.

Within these dynamics of mutual collaboration, it is important for all ICSW members and regions to work together as a team. And to work with other international organizations, such as IFS or International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW). For this reason, I would like to thank our colleagues, inside and outside of the ICSW. My heartfelt thanks go out to all of you for making possible this cooperative project and a better ICSW for the 21st century.

Take care and stay healthy!

Antonio López Peláez
ICSW Executive Director