

# Diversity and the Search for International Common Grounds in Social Work Education.



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Long before Marshall McLuhan's idea of the world as a global village and globalisation as a more or less daily economic reality, social work has become international and multicultural. Some believe, that international social work has always been seen as something rather new or modern that started with and was the result of globalisation and then entered our daily lives and became a more common concern.

Nevertheless, however we perceive and interpret our professional past, we will find in old and current publications (i.e. Encyclopedias and Social Work Dictionaries, International Social Work Journals etc.) in archives and institutes (i.e. the Social Welfare Archives in the USA, TATA-Institute of Social Science in India, DZI in Germany etc.) that it started long ago and that the scope of international and intercultural social concerns and respective organisations, projects and conferences goes back more than 150 years (Blankenburg/Wendling 1988 on the History of the International Council on Social Welfare). These resources are full of interesting material.

The topic of this presentation on the compatibility of social systems would actually need a thorough and careful political and historical analysis. This, however desirable, will not be possible in a paper such as this and I beg for understanding. I will not be able to go too deeply into the details because it would fill books, such as *International Social Work – Professional Action in an Interdependent World* (Healy 2001) and other comprehensive accounts. International gatherings and larger assemblies coordinating social services have been recorded since approximately the year 1850 (Blankenburg/Wendling 1988). Then, discussions focussed voluntary or forced migration, health and penal institutions, poverty and cooperation concerning poor laws, financial and social injustices etc. During those times, many countries, for decades and even centuries occupied and exploited by colonial powers, were unable to unfold their true potential and were dominated by foreign rules and policies. Their resistance and fight for independence can be acknowledged as an important contribution to the development of more cooperative attitudes and a growing sense of world-wide interdependence and international solidarity. Social work in the post-colonial world and centrifugal forces played an important part in the indigenisation discourse.

The choices we have made for this contribution may appear rather limited and probably too onesided or even scattered because the structural and political conditions in the various parts of the world are vastly different. For instance: while many of us understand social welfare and social work as curative and corrective measures many will point out that social development will need to come first in order to ensure the provision of the most basic needs – i.e. according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Social work is always concerned with help in the very concrete individual experience and with social reform in the collective or societal existence.

Yet others will understandably stress the importance of basic human rights. We believe that all these aspects cannot be separated. So we focus within the social work spectrum not so much on existing dichotomies as on inclusion – on the unifying potential. The number of social workers who are united in the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) bears witness to a growing international community of social workers who are thinking, feeling and acting in similar but not necessarily identical ways. IFSW started with 12 countries and less than 50,000 social workers in 1956, reached nearly 500,000 at its fiftieth anniversary and now, in 2012, boasts 750,000 colleagues from about 90 nations. Fifty years of activities across national borders have become part of the mainstream in social work philosophy and daily concerns ([www.ifsw.org](http://www.ifsw.org)).

### **It All Started With Practical Challenges**

Formalised training for the profession began in some countries shortly before 1900. Since then, the first international conferences have been organised by all sorts of practitioners and amateurs in the helping professions. Of approximately 5,000 participants from many multicultural backgrounds and social services there were also educators from the relatively young profession of social work. Experienced graduates of the first social work programmes also participated. The main concern was centered around practical questions that needed solutions – for instance the increasing streams of refugees after natural catastrophies and during man-made disasters such as wars, financial crises etc.

After World War I and the founding of the League of Nations, the predecessor of the United Nations, the first and lasting international body of a large mix of national and international social services, the International Council on Social Welfare played a leading role as an umbrella organisation which hosted a big international congress in Paris in 1928 – the “Quinzaine Sociale”. This congress was a milestone for the future of social services and the entire field of practice, for social work training and education and for the development of professional organisations. This will be briefly described in its developmental context.

### **The International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW)**

The ICSW ([www.icsw.org](http://www.icsw.org)) was one of the earliest and largest international bodies that encompassed public and private social work agencies as they developed in many different countries – such as for instance the early national charity organisations. The history of such organisations and their early cooperation goes back as far as the mid 1800s and earlier, usually initiated by individuals who knew each other and were driven by the necessity for social services beyond national boundaries. These origins are not well known because of constant more pressing needs and the function of „fire fighting“. But if we are able to take the time to delve into history, it can be very informative and inspiring (see Blankenburg/Wendling 1988).

The early conferences were conducted fairly regularly and were usually only cancelled in times of crises and wars, such as World War I before the well-documented „Quinzaine Sociale“ of 1928 in Paris, France (Social Welfare History Archives). It is not surprising that early on our profession, in connection with the feminist movement and other critical streams in society, called for a world without war. Jane Addams, the founder of the International League for Peace and Freedom, was the first Nobel Peace Prize winner from the Social Work profession. Together with others they took concrete steps to prevent and later attempted to end WWI. One of the pioneers involved in these efforts pleaded in her invitation to the above-mentioned „Quinzaine Sociale“:

„War annihilates everything that social work tries to accomplish... This is the reason why social workers should be the first ones to facilitate and maintain peace-creating international relations.“ (Salomon 1928, 496)

Meanwhile, the participating services in these international and multicultural conferences are now categorised as GO-s (Governmental or Public Organisations), NGO-s (Non-Governmental or Private Organisations), and IGO-s (Inter-Governmental Organisations such as the United Nations, the European Union, the Union of American States etc.).

### **The International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW)**

Formal education for social work began in some western industrialised countries in around 1900. In some countries, national associations began to coordinate their efforts. Negotiations for more international cooperation of schools were called for. Some directors and teachers of the first schools were involved in organising the Quinzaine Sociale in Paris 1928. A particular section on social work education was added at this congress. In this section, the first suggestion was made to create an international school of social work in Switzerland. Annual summer schools were planned and took place in the Netherlands. Participating members of the schools of social work agreed to ask the International Labor Organisation – ILO in Geneva (as part of the United Nations) to function as a clearinghouse for all training institutions. All schools and training organisations were encouraged to send relevant materials to Geneva in order to have a central and comprehensive collection from all existing schools of social work. Martinus Moltzer of the Netherlands suggested the formation of an International Committee of Schools of Social Work. This was realised on June 12th and 13th, in 1929 in Berlin, Germany, with Alice Salomon elected as the first president. The international committee was later renamed and became the International Association of Schools of Social Work – IASSW ([www.iassw-aiets.org](http://www.iassw-aiets.org)). Presidents, headquarters and issues have changed many times since then (Seibel 2008). During the early phase of development, presidencies and board membership of this association were dominated by representatives from the western industrialised countries. Now there is an obvious shift to more balanced representation since the independence of the former colonialised countries, the upheavals of World War I and II and the political changes after the Cold War.

The first comprehensive study of „Education for Social Work – A Sociological Interpretation based on an International Survey“, was written by Alice Salomon and edited by the IASSW in 1937 (Salomon 1937). The following overview is interesting for several reasons. At the critical stage of the Wall Street Crash and the world-wide depression, our pioneers were careful and factual and yet optimistic in their first comparative analysis of social work education:

„In each country the schools bear the stamp of the national character. On one hand this character is determined by the respective school system which is built on specific educational philosophies. On the other hand it is dependent on the tasks for social work which, in turn, are dependent on the social and economic complexities of each country.“  
(Salomon/Macadam/Mulle 1928, 2)

The following dark era of German Fascism created a setback – and most likely not only in German social work education. When international relations became tense in Europe and Hitler came to power in 1933, reactionary forces in Germany pressured Jewish-born Alice Salomon to resign from the presidency of the „International Committee“, threatening that all German schools would otherwise leave the organisation. Salomon complied with their demand but was immediately reinstated by the international board (Wieler 1988). While she

stayed in Germany to help younger social workers to find refuge in other countries, the pressure increased, and Salomon was asked by the „International Committee of Schools“ to travel to Switzerland and – on the basis of the materials collected so far at the ILO in Geneva – compile the aforementioned worldwide study on social work education (Salomon 1937). This study of all 179 existing schools up to 1937 is little known while much later studies, sponsored by the UN, are emphasised by some American authors (Healy in Seibel 2008, p. 219) – perhaps, because not all of the mentioned schools had been members of the newly founded „International Committee“. The earliest study, though, shows very clearly that social work education had, since the beginning of the last century, spread all over the world and has rapidly grown since then. The above listed overview shows grave changes that lay ahead: a) the first established schools at that early stage were fairly wide-spread and b) they were soon, due to ideological and political changes and also as a result of the World Wars, again partly disengaged in the ongoing international and intercultural discourse.

After 1933 and the first real test of equivalence of social work degrees, i.e. when not only German but otherwise uprooted populations and social workers fled or were expelled and tried to practice in various countries of refuge, she added more sceptically but perhaps more realistically:

„An international comparison cannot attempt to set up standards by which to gauge the quality of various systems. It remains doubtful whether it ever can be measured. For the only test of quality and value of a school of social work is its usefulness and adaptation to the specific needs it has to serve and these needs are national.“ (Salomon 1937, 3)

Much later, after „Perestroika“ and „Glasnost“, the above international study was helpful in some countries that were cut off from social work developments in the Western World. At the international conferences, before political changes, socialist or communist countries were not – or only marginally – involved in international discourse. There were occasional observers from the communist countries, but not everyone was able to participate. One exception was former Yugoslavia which seemed to function as a sort of bridge during and after the Cold War between the Eastern and Western powers – with Eugen Pusic as president of ICSW from 1964 to 1968. After decades of the Cold War and the following political changes Salomon’s study of the thirties with information on each school of social work was – particularly in the former East Bloc countries – helpful in the reconstruction of educational programs under new auspices. But the comparison of social-political conditions between countries still remains as a rather difficult issue.

Now, after more than a hundred years of social work education and the daily confrontation with „globalisation“, national perspectives and their respective multicultural, economic, religious attributes and social politics etc. still seem to be relevant in the discourse. However, efforts and progress have definitely been made. Books and the website of IASSW, the portraits of IASSW-Presidents (Seibel 2008) and ongoing information on the history of international social work (Wieler in Seibel 2011, pp. 249) contain more details.

### **The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)**

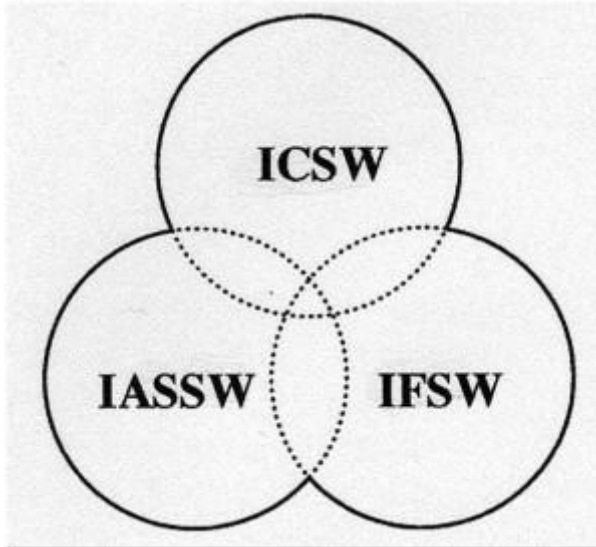
Soon after social workers graduated from their schools and were involved in the field of practice, they began to come together in professional interest groups. They were concerned with best practice on behalf of their clients but also with good working conditions and adequate pay. The need for international cooperation among national groups of social workers was recognised very early and the establishment of concrete links also began at the „Quinzaine Sociale“ in Paris. Those trained professionals attending the 1928 meeting in Paris

also agreed to set up an international “clearinghouse” for all existing social work associations. This was the precursor of the current International Federation of Social Workers ([www.ifsw.org](http://www.ifsw.org)) and it was the birthplace of the first international permanent office for social workers.

In the early years of the last century, different associations of social workers existed in some countries. Groups of social work practitioners came together depending on religion, field of work, gender or ethnic origin, to share ideas for better service to their respective clients. Soon, they realised that they also shared a common purpose. They were concerned largely with their particular practices and/or clientele but to establish social work as a new and viable profession they had to join forces to form strong national associations. This proved to be easier in some countries than in others: for instance the unification of different groups in the USA and in the UK happened in 1955 and in 1965. The first attempt in Germany took place in 1975 and finally unification was achieved in 1992. In some countries, however, colleagues are still struggling to join forces. In 1950, on the occasion of another international ICSW conference again held in Paris, a decision was reached to found an international federation for social workers if at least seven national associations would vote accordingly. Discussions continued during international meetings in India in 1952 and Canada in 1954. Finally at the next congress of the International Council on Social Work (ICSW) in Munich, twelve national associations (Australia, Belgium, Denmark, Canada, Germany, England, France, Greece, Italy, The Netherlands, Switzerland and the United States of America) became the first members of the International Federation of Social Workers on the 9th of August 1956.

IFSW has grown ever since. General information and the ongoing increase in professional associations can best be followed on the website of IFSW ([www.ifsw.org](http://www.ifsw.org)). Membership went up and down when countries withdrew, mostly for financial reasons, or were suspended for political reasons when they would not go along with IFSW principles: i.e. South Africa during the time of apartheid. But the growing numbers of national associations demonstrate very clearly that there is growing consensus regarding what they are striving for. An example is e.g. the first honouring of a very courageous colleague, Irena Sendler, from Poland as Most Distinguished Social Worker of IFSW. She risked her life by saving – together with other colleagues – 2500 Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto during WWII. This rescue action was withheld by the Communist Regime from the public until 1999, because the Polish underground organisation Zegota had cooperated with the Polish Government in Exile (Wieler 2008).

## Ongoing challenges and accomplishments of the above international bodies



Despite the fact that the three organisations have the same basic roots, the cooperation of ICSW, IASSW and IFSW has not always been easy. They started under the umbrella of the World Conference “Quinzaine Sociale” in 1928 in Paris and expanded step by step from then onward. They were interdependent from the beginning: on the one hand connected with each other but, on the other, separate and partly independent. All three organisations were present and active at the subsequent world conferences in 1932 and 1936, but this unity was soon disturbed by international political tension and by the devastation of the Second World War. It took years to reconnect internationally – i.e. 1952 in India, 1954 in Canada and again 1956 in Germany. Now, as a few times earlier, world conferences of all three organisations are held during even years and regional conferences during odd years. Each organisation worked on their particular concerns and provided drafts that were the basis for later joint consideration, as for instance:

- Following various national formulations on professional codes of ethics for social workers, the first International Code of Ethics was voted for in 1976 by the IFSW-Assembly in Puerto Rico (Wieler in Seibel 2008, p. 155).
- Ethics in Social Work were separately agreed to by IASSW and IFSW in their meetings in 2000 in Montréal and in 2001 accepted by both organisations in Copenhagen, Denmark.
- IFSW formulated and revised the first International Definition of Social Work and both organisations also agreed on it in 2001 in Denmark. But since these definitions need to be open for revision there are ongoing consultations for this definition.
- In 2000 a joint initiative was set up by IASSW and IFSW in Montréal to draft Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training under the chairmanship of Vishantie Sewpaul of South Africa. They were adopted by both organisations at their General Assemblies in Adelaide, Australia, in October of 2004. (for the three last documents see: [www.iassw-aiets.org](http://www.iassw-aiets.org) or [www.ifsw.org](http://www.ifsw.org))

At the 50th anniversary of IFSW, senior members of ICSW, IASSW and IFSW exchanged their experiences on these issues and unanimously suggested joint conferences from then on. Possibly as a consequence, the latest world conferences in Hongkong 2010 and in Stockholm 2012 were conducted together and led to further joint discussion and action, as for instance the Global Agenda (<http://www.iassw-aiets.org/global-agenda>).

Since the establishment of the „threesome“ of ICSW, IASSW and IFSW, there have been



major changes in the world, mostly due to economics and political developments after the Cold War and the radical political changes at the end of the last century. In summary, it can be noted that we are dealing now with a truly worldwide net of organisations in social work that never existed before.

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