

# Seventh International Conference of Social Work

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*The development of social welfare programs based on self-help and community action is a requisite in efforts to raise the standards of living all over the world. What is being done in this area and what more can be done were the central theses of the Seventh International Conference of Social Work, reported in the following pages.*

PROMOTING social welfare through self-help and cooperative action was the theme of the Seventh International Conference of Social Work, which met in Toronto, Canada, from June 27 to July 2, 1954.<sup>1</sup> Forty-eight countries from every part of the world sent about 1,600 delegates—social workers, board members, executives of social security institutes, and technicians from the related fields in health, agriculture, and education.

The principles of self-help and cooperative action and their application in different social work programs and services were presented by the delegates as they participated in the conference plenary sessions, panel discussions, and study groups. The more formal parts of the program were supplemented by hospitality in Canadian homes, where the delegates had many opportunities to exchange experiences with their colleagues from other countries.

The first general session of the conference was addressed by the Honorable Lester B. Pearson, Canadian Minister of External Affairs. Mr. Pearson sketched a challenging picture of human need and analyzed the efforts being made through the United Nations and other organizations to close the gap between the countries with great potential but little technical development and those countries further along the road in scientific advances. Against this backdrop of information on general world conditions and programs of technical aid, the conference turned its attention

more specifically to the exchange of experience, evaluation, and formulation of conclusions regarding social welfare programs, with specific reference to self-help and cooperative community action—the conference theme.

The conference climaxed extensive technical preparation in the individual countries under the leadership of national committees of the conference. In the United States, professional social welfare organizations throughout the country had been engaged for several months in assembling information for a United States Committee report, *Promoting Social Welfare Through Self-Help and Cooperative Action in the United States*. Similar reports had been prepared by other national committees, and the delegates arriving in Toronto had these pamphlets available as a source of information on social welfare programs in the different countries. These national reports, plus the discussions, marked a further step in the development of exchange in international social welfare.

For many delegates the conference offered the first opportunity to meet and exchange views with social workers from other countries and to learn of new methods being tried and new services being developed. The conference sessions have attracted wide interest ever since their inception. The conference, established in 1928, has as its purpose "to provide an international forum for the discussion of social work, social welfare and related issues, and to promote the exchange of information and experience among social workers, social agencies and others interested in social welfare throughout the world." The conference is also interested in efforts "to facilitate and promote cooperation

among international organizations related to the field of social welfare."<sup>2</sup> An international nongovernmental organization, the conference has consultative status with the United Nations, the United Nations International Children's Fund, the World Health Organization, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization.

## Focus on Community Life

Self-help and cooperative action, cardinal principles in the social work field for many years, were undoubtedly highlighted as the theme of the international conference because of the tremendous expansion in technical assistance around the world. The social work profession itself has long been a proponent of the theory that individuals and families have the capacity to help themselves, and it has developed special skill in the application of the helping principle with individuals and community groups. These approaches are now receiving wide attention in countries just establishing basic community services in many different technical fields. Through projects sponsored by the United Nations and its specialized agencies and by the international voluntary agencies, as well as through the activities sponsored by the United States Foreign Operations Administration, doctors, teachers, and agricultural and labor specialists, as well as social workers, have been assigned to these countries in the worldwide program to raise standards of living. These men and women have found that technical skill in a specialized field, when it is accompanied by broad planning for individual and community participation in projects, makes a far more lasting contribution than is otherwise possible. The people in any locality—city or village—can and usually wish to take responsibility for planning their own

<sup>2</sup> Excerpts from the conference constitution, included in *Seventh International Conference Program*, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada.

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<sup>1</sup> The published conference proceedings will be available later in 1954 from the United States Committee, International Conference of Social Work.

projects and for participating in their development. It is then, as projects move ahead on the basis of solid community understanding, support, and interest, that the objectives of technical assistance become a reality.

Delegates to the conference reported great variety in their approaches to community participation but considerable agreement on basic objectives. Safeguarding the capacity of the individual to help himself and providing opportunity to gain group experience in solving common problems were general themes. Countries with well-established social welfare programs expressed considerable interest in the new approaches being tried in such countries as India, Egypt, and Iraq, where a broad coordinated program of services is envisaged that encompasses several professional fields. The vital role of active community participation was underscored in such situations, where success is directly related to creating conditions that stimulate local interest and initiative.

Many delegates commented that the broad social and economic planning now being undertaken by countries facing serious problems of poverty, undernourishment, and illiteracy should demonstrate what approaches and methods of administration are most productive of social change. Social workers in these regions have an exceptional opportunity to fuse the skills of community organization, group work, and case-work in their efforts to help families improve their living conditions. A number of delegates expressed their great interest in keeping informed about the experience in new social welfare programs in these areas—now beginning to be industrialized—since the results of the different experiments may help all countries to a better understanding of how the development of complementary and mutually reinforcing programs in the social field can be best related to meeting human need.

The several study groups in the conference considered a wide variety of special interests, such as social security, leadership training, family and child welfare, and rural cooperatives. William L. Mitchell, Deputy Commissioner of the Social Security Adminis-

tration, served as the United States specialist on social security. Jay L. Roney, director of the Bureau of Public Assistance, participated in a panel discussion, held the first day of the conference, concerning self-help as it relates to services for families and children. Particular attention was given to methods of administering social security programs and the effect on families and children. There was United States participation in a plenary session and in three other panels, and a specialist from this country also took part in the several study groups. An exhibit from the United States—"Social Welfare in the United States: Of the People, By the People, For the People"—emphasized the conference theme of joint action through the participation of the whole community in services, as contributors and as beneficiaries.

The plenary sessions considered the basic conference theme in its broad context—the meaning of self-help as applied in the major types of social welfare programs, its significance in the world community, and the implications for national leadership. One of the most interesting and provocative papers<sup>3</sup> was read by Dr. J. F. deJongh, of the School of Social Work in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Re-examining the concept of self-help in modern society, Dr. deJongh pointed out the difficulties and deprivations faced by man as he finds less and less support through the natural bonds of a large and closely knit family and a familiar community. At the same time he is being asked, Dr. deJongh said, to assume greater responsibilities in a complex society, particularly in an industrializing civilization. The ever-changing community—the constant flow of new people with different cultural patterns, values, different methods of work—puts exceptional strain on the modern man and his immediate family. Thus, while modern society undermines man's capacity to help himself and to rely on himself, it also expects from him "more mature problem-solving than ever before, in view of the necessity to adjust to ever-changing life conditions."

<sup>3</sup> J. F. deJongh, *Self Help in Modern Society*, Press Release Summary, International Conference of Social Work, Toronto University, July 1, 1954.

Greater attention to community life as one of the primary and vital necessities of human life was encouraged. Social workers were urged to help develop conditions in community life that would enable persons to help themselves. Self-help and help from others were seen as complementary to each other, and social workers from all countries were urged by Dr. deJongh to study what can be done:

1. To protect, to improve and in any case not to destroy the conditions in community life which enable people to help themselves;
2. To adapt our general educational system so as to emphasize in our teaching less how our actual problems have been solved and more the methods of intelligent problem-solving as such;
3. To study our methods of help so as to give the help in such a way that it strengthens the self-help capacity.

Throughout many of the conference sessions the need for examining methods of problem-solving by groups was recognized. The importance of sharing knowledge and skill in ways of working together towards social objectives and experience in democratic solving of common problems was repeatedly emphasized. It was also pointed out many times that social work concepts and methods developed in the Western culture are not transferable without adaptation to South Asia, Africa, and other geographic areas. At the same time the contribution of the United States in developing methods that have made the social work process "an enabling process" was seen as vital in encouraging self-help.

### ***International Friendships***

One of the speakers commented to the delegates on the first day of the meeting, "If each one of you makes one new friend—just one real friend from another country—at this conference I believe you'll feel the week has been a success in terms of advancing international understanding." Actually most of the delegates made many more than one new friend. The setting of the conference (the University of Toronto campus), the living in dormitories, and the informal cafeteria arrangements created many

occasions for social workers from different countries to meet and spend enough time together to become really acquainted and to learn something about life in another country.

The conference also provided opportunities for the delegates to see many old friends. Former United Nations Fellows were prominent in the delegations from many countries, and visitors who had come to the United States under other programs, such as those sponsored by the Department of State and the Foreign Operations Administration, were found in many of the discussion groups and as leaders in the panel sessions and plenary meetings.

The delegates who had had opportunity to study social work in different settings showed special competence and understanding and skill in discussion. Their ready grasp of the points of view of delegates from other countries and their ability to identify what was common and what was important professionally provided a real demonstration of the value of international exchange. Experience at the conference reinforced the view that, for the mature worker, a study experience in another country in a culture different from his own makes a unique contribution to his professional growth and results in international understanding of mutual problems and common needs.

### *Special Meetings*

During the conference a number of special meetings were held. At one, the United Nations technical staff met the delegates from different countries who had a special interest in training to discuss the new United Nations draft study materials on training for social work. This study, on which the United Nations staff has been engaged for over a year, is focused on developments in the field of social work education around the world since the first survey on the same subject was issued by the United Nations in 1950. Training consultants from the various countries met first with the United Nations staff in a general session and then divided into regional groups for discussion of sections of the draft study relating to their own geographic areas.

The preliminary findings of the United Nations study indicate a substantial growth since 1949 in the development of opportunities in many parts of the world for social welfare education. There is, of course, considerable variety in the curriculums, and there are many problems in locating suitable field work opportunities—particularly in those countries where social welfare programs are just getting under way. The growth in these training opportunities demonstrates clearly, however, the interest in some kind of special training for work in the social welfare field. It also indicates a consistent effort on the part of many of the countries represented at the conference to establish schools in their own countries and, through overseas fellowships, to develop teaching personnel to staff these developing educational resources.

### *Postconference Study Tour*

The United States Committee of the International Conference sponsored a postconference study tour for a group of conference delegates—80 board members, social workers, and volunteers from 12 countries of South Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Visits were planned to two cities in the United States—Washington, D. C., and New York City. The International Service of the Social Security Administration, with the assistance of an advisory committee of official and voluntary agency representatives, planned the visits to social agencies and other points of interest in Washington. Delegates were interested in learning as much as possible about American social welfare programs and American ways of living. They visited many points of official interest as well as American homes.

The high point of the Washington tour was the visit to the White House, where President Eisenhower received and greeted the delegates. At the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Under Secretary Nelson A. Rockefeller and the Commissioner of Social Security, the Deputy Commissioner, Bureau directors, and other officials conferred with the group. A visit to Congress was sponsored by the Carrie Chapman Catt Memorial Fund.

The U. S. Departments of Labor, Interior, and Agriculture arranged special programs, as did the Pan American Union, the American Red Cross, and several voluntary agencies serving Washington. The embassies entertained for their nationals in the group. The Washington chapters of professional social work organizations—the American Association of Social Workers, the American Association of Group Workers, the Social Work Research Group, the American Association of Psychiatric Social Workers, and the American Association of Medical Social Workers—were also active in the delegates' behalf, and arrangements were made for individual American social workers to act as host to them some time during their stay in Washington. A similar program in and around New York included, in addition to conferences at social welfare agencies, a visit to Hyde Park and a reception held by the Mayor of New York.

### *Planning Ahead for 1956*

The International Conference re-elected George E. Haynes, General Secretary, National Council of Social Service, London, England, as president. Others elected include, as vice presidents, George F. Davidson, Deputy Minister of National Welfare of Canada; Michel Goutos, National Council of Social Welfare, Greece; Luis Mancini, National Social Welfare Commission, Brazil; Jivraj Mehta, Minister of Finance, India; and Dr. H. M. L. H. Sark, of the Netherlands. The United States members on the executive committee of the conference include Donald S. Howard, Dean of the School of Social Welfare, University of California at Los Angeles, and Fred K. Hoehler, executive director, Citizens of Greater Chicago. Harry Carey, executive director of the United Community Services, Boston, serves as an assistant treasurer-general. The conference has decided to convene its next session in Munich, Germany, in August 1956. The focus of the conference—The Effects of Industrialization and Urbanization on Family and Community Life—will be of particular interest to social workers from the United States.