

After the XIVth International Conference on Social Welfare

by M. Esnard

The congress is held by some writers to be the present day antidote to modern man's isolation. Must this be seen as the reason for the constantly large participation in International Conferences on social welfare, in spite of the proliferation of seminars and meetings?

Undoubtedly social workers and representatives of allied professions are not immune from this modern trend. Thus, every two years, when the International Council on Social Welfare organises its international forum there is a veritable "Migration" of office holders in the social welfare field. They come from all quarters to pool, for a week, their experiences and ideas on the selected theme.

In 1968, more than two thousand participants from 63 countries attended the XIVth International Conference on Social Welfare, which was held in Finland, at Otaniemi, not far from Helsinki.

The general theme which was the background to the various debates was chosen for its connection with the United Nations' decision to nominate 1968 as the "International Human Rights Year". That theme was:

" Social Welfare and Human Rights "

a subject of vast scope if ever there was one and whose two main terms, each of which could have been the subject of a meeting, were worthy of consideration from the angle of their inter-relation, that

is to say, their affinities and interdependence, their implementation and even the opposition or conflict between them.

In the preliminary notes to the Conference, the International Council on Social Welfare made a point of defining the meaning to be attributed to the terms "social policy" and "human rights" in the context of the Conference.

"Social policy" was to be construed as meaning "everything which concerns fundamental decision in the social field, the operation and organization of public and private social institutions".

The term "human rights" should be interpreted "in the sense accepted in the Universal Declaration" having in mind whether, and if so, to what extent, it is used in legislation or jurisprudence, whether these rights are actually enjoyed and, if not, what legal remedies are available to citizens.

Conscious of these pitfalls to which this theme could lead, the organizers expressly emphasized that the subject should "be treated on a level made possible by the contemporary development of the social sciences, social welfare and social work, but avoiding rhetoric and too much attention to technical detail about legal and procedural matters".

Consequently the study of the theme's subdivisions, particularly in the general meetings and study groups, permitted participants to broach their subject from a practical point of view.

General meetings and study groups were only two of the working methods adopted by the International Council on Social Welfare.

Apart from the plenary sessions, open to everybody, on very wide and somewhat abstract themes: Social Change—Human Rights—Social Welfare; The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its Bearing on Social Welfare Activities; Social Work and its Human Rights Aspects, the Conference included nine general meetings and thirteen study groups, open to all participants and held concurrently, as well as six commissions of a limited number of representatives appointed by each National Committee.

It will therefore be understood in what dilemma the participants found themselves, faced with such a choice. It was not made any easier by the interest which each of the general meetings and study groups aroused.

The general meetings include the themes:

- Human Rights and Family Policy;
- Social Policy and Human Rights in Development towards a welfare society;
- The Rights of the Client;
- The Rights of the Child;
- The Rights of the Aged.

The study groups, attended by people of similar interests, were concerned with more limited subjects to be considered from the view point of the participants' experience.

Thus the concept of social policy was studied in relation to various subjects, namely the right to work; the right to health; the right to education and culture; the right to leisure; the right to housing.

In addition, the rights of the physically and mentally handicapped as related to social policy were studied, as well as alcoholism and drug dependency; migrants, refugees and human rights; and human rights and antisocial behaviour.

To give an account of all papers delivered and ideas exchanged, without being in possession of the documents finally issued, would be impossible. It would have required the gift of ubiquity to do justice to the work of the Conference.

However, we shall give extracts covering what appeared to be of particular interest to the Red Cross in the reports presented by the six commissions to the plenary session and which dealt with:

- comparison of the values and finalities of human rights and social welfare;
- human rights, social welfare and level of socio-economic development;
- social welfare in the light of the enjoyment and exercise of human rights;
- social welfare for the community and the problem of its reconciliation with individual rights;
- functions and methods of social work and social welfare and the safeguarding of human rights;
- the institutions created by social welfare and human rights.

Whilst the first commission stressed the specific value of each culture and the importance of women's rights, the second and fourth pointed out the responsibility youth is ready to assume for socio-economic development. The third commission laid stress essentially on the role of governments and voluntary organizations, not only as "partners" but also as reciprocally stimulating forces.

The members of the commission expressly drew attention to the need, on the one hand, of maintaining voluntary organizations' independence and, on the other hand, of those organizations' continuing their efforts to maintain or improve efficiency in order to keep abreast of developments in social welfare.

Although the fifth and sixth commissions dealt more particularly with the role and responsibility of professional social workers and social institutions, we may note two of their conclusions. One was to the effect that all citizens should be correctly informed on their right to community services and how to exercise that right; the other was that such rights, including social welfare benefits, should be available to any person—migrant or not—residing in any country.

Such, in brief, was the work of the Conference. However, we feel we should not omit to mention either the speech by Mr. Pierre Laroque, State Councillor (France), when he was presented with the René Sand Prize¹, nor the Red Cross meeting organized by the Finnish Red Cross and the League.

With the eloquence for which he is known, Mr. Pierre Laroque recalled the philosophy underlying the work of Dr. René Sand who, it will be remembered, was the promotor of the International Conferences on Social Welfare and Secretary General of the League from 1921 to 1926. He then delivered a paper on: "Human Rights, Social Work and Social Policy". This speech was divided into three parts which dealt with: "Civil and Political Rights and Social Rights"; "Social Rights and Social Work"; "The Right to Dignity and Social Policy". It was perhaps in the final part of his paper that Mr. Pierre Laroque's choice of subjects was of particular interest to the Red Cross world.

¹ In memory of René Sand, this prize is awarded for distinction in social service and presented at each International Conference on Social Welfare.

He reminded the meeting “ of the great need . . . for education in solidarity, to make people aware of their interdependence and thus create in them a real and profound will to provide for others, as well as for themselves, the means of material and moral existence which will assure their full dignity ”.

Mr. Pierre Laroque then broached the “ Modern Problem of Old Age ”, stating that it “ consists not only, nor perhaps mainly, in providing adequate means of subsistence to the aged. It consists essentially in assuring these aged people an appropriate place in society ”.

He then discussed the question of the disabled and after stressing the “ too frequent tendency to enclose them within their invalidity, within their handicap, by organizing for them a life apart ”, the speaker stated “ it is no doubt more difficult, but indispensable . . . to treat them always as men and women like everyone else, striving only, and with the greatest possible discretion, to facilitate their return to a normal existence ”.

Finally, underlining the considerable progress in modern legislation towards a replacement of assistance by insurance, Mr. Laroque concluded: “ We have tried to demonstrate not only the fundamental unity of human rights—civils rights and social rights—but also the contribution which human rights can, and must, bring to the definition and formulation of a social policy.

For such a policy fully to attain its objective it must strive constantly to respect everyone’s human dignity. And this can only be achieved by organizing the largest possible solidarity and a conscious fellowship.

Dignity and solidarity, dignity through solidarity, this is, this must be, the essence of social policy. In other words: social policy must be, everywhere and at all times, the expression of human brotherhood ”.

These ideas are no doubt not absolutely new for many National Societies, but it is sometimes worthwhile hearing them restated apart from any Red Cross context, especially by someone who is an authority on the subject.

We shall not dwell here on the Red Cross Meeting as it was already dealt with in *International Review*.¹ Suffice to mention that

¹ See *International Review of the Red Cross*, November 1968.

it was preceded by a reception given by the Finnish Red Cross the previous evening to enable Red Cross delegates to discuss with the officials of the Conference and of the Finnish Social Services, that it included a visit of several of the Finnish Red Cross achievements in Helsinki, and that it was followed by a session under the chairmanship of General Martola, President of the National Society.

It is difficult to make an assessment of a Conference open to so many participants on such a vast subject as that considered by the XIVth International Conference on Social Welfare. That is why, to conclude, we shall consider it merely from the Red Cross view point.

Apart from the Red Cross contacts and exchanges of information made possible especially by the Red Cross Meeting, the International Conference on Social Welfare enabled our organization to make its presence known to the representatives of public and private institutions from all continents, not only through the showing of films and co-operation in the Exhibition which was part of the Conference programme, but also through the voices of various speakers and the active participation of a number of delegates representing both their National Red Cross Society and their National Social Welfare Committee.

Perhaps a place was never more generously given to the Red Cross than at Helsinki where several of its representatives were invited to take part in Round Table conferences and Commissions to promote the Red Cross mission.

No doubt this must be taken as a sign of recognition of the role of the Red Cross in social welfare, for the comfort it brings to the sick, for its struggle to dispel the loneliness of the elderly, for its assistance to the disabled to help them share in normal daily life: in a word, for all its activities in keeping with the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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