

NEWS AND VIEWS ... from ICSW

It was a sad week in the office recently. One of the senior managers of the organization that hosts ICSW (MOVISIE, Netherlands Centre for Social Development), died suddenly while on holiday. He was in his fifties with a young family. No one was prepared for his death, least of all his family.

It made me ask, how can we prepare for and respond to events that are traumatic? My mind drifted back to my social work days in hospitals where death was regular; too regular. It was in the days when death or impending death was denied by the medical staff. They had been trained to preserve life and death was a defeat.

As social workers we were not permitted to tell a person their diagnosis. I learned that the way around this was to ask the person with a life threatening diagnosis what they understood about their illness. There were two very clear directions for the subsequent discussion. Some, and it was a very small minority, said they had a minor ailment and would be home soon. These people had a very strong barrier and generally I left it at that point. The others had a myriad of answers but most had discovered without being told directly that they were dying. Usually, because the game of 'not telling the patient' was being played, the person had joined the silence. When I asked the person what they understood of their illness the flood gates opened. There was fear, confusion and a feeling of betrayal that the staff had not been honest. Worse still was when relatives had been told but the person had not been given the opportunity to share knowledge about their own illness. Much work followed to manage the damage to trust and feelings.

I had not really expected that my counselling background would be of direct use when I moved into policy development and administration. It has been. The lessons of my case work and group work days have stayed with me. Trauma comes in many forms. Regardless of the type of trauma we still have the option of denying it or meeting the challenges trauma presents.

The global financial and economic crisis is creating havoc but already the big financial institutions that were at the epicentre of the crisis are flexing their muscles and asking 'what crisis?' The deniers. Many of us in the social development sphere are worried that the waves of the crisis are hitting the developing world at a time when the global North is pretending that the trauma is passing. The opportunity now exists to put in place new measures to protect the most vulnerable.

In April 2009, the UN Chief Executives Board (CEB) accepted the concept of the social protection floor as one of its policies to cope with the global crisis. In a paper (soon to be released at the time of writing) the UN and the other cooperating agencies state, 'A social protection floor is important to all countries at all times. It is even more important now that the global economic and financial crisis threatens to roll back decades of investment in favour of health and human development. It risks compromising progress towards internationally agreed development goals, including the MDGs'.¹

The advocates for a social protection floor see it as consisting of two elements. The first is essential services. Governments have the responsibility to ensure citizens have access to public services including clean water, sanitation, health, education and family-focussed social work support. The second element is a set of social transfers in cash and in kind to people in poverty that enhance their access to food and minimum income security.

This is the time for long-term visions that create a new future. While governments are struggling with budget deficits this is the time to review economic and social policies. We have the opportunity to consider new strategies for social transfers and put in place the directions that can take us beyond the current crisis.

In June 2010 at the conference in Hong Kong, (www.swsd2010.org), ICSW will join with the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers to set future agendas. One agenda is the introduction of the global social protection floor. To this end, the leaders of the three organizations will be meeting UN officials to show that the representatives of civil society are keen and willing to work with governments to put in place new policies that protect the citizens of all countries.

Civil society has an endless task of creating links with governments, regional and global agencies. We need to be very aware of opportunities to move agendas forward. An opportunity exists to move in concert with the many UN and related agencies to create a new world of social protection. I have tried to create a link in the mind of you the reader to the activities of the organizations that represent you globally. Regardless

of whether we work on the ground or in global social policy we can all move the agendas forward to provide better social protection.

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Notes

1. United Nations (2009) *Initiative VI A social protection floor*. Unpublished.