

FIRST SOCIAL WORK INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE. ENVISIONING SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL WORK: EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES AND INDIVIDUALS

**Bucharest, Faculty of Sociology and Social
Work November 3-4 2016**

Social Work International Conference Envisioning Sustainable Social Work: Empowering Communities and Individuals had its first edition on November 3-4 2016 at the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work in partnership with The Association of Schools of Social Work in Romania. The venue of the conference was the newest building of the University of Bucharest, a hub for interdisciplinary research and a host of several recent international conferences (e.g. on migration and European Social Survey). The University of Bucharest is one of the most important universities in Romania being established in 1864. Before the official opening of the conference there were three workshops organised (with modicum fees)

for social work practitioners (see a description of them below). Participants of the conference (more than 75) were from various countries, such as UK, Sweden, Israel, Croatia, Belgium, Hungary, Iran, Spain, Italy, France and Romania.

The official opening of the conference included speeches from representatives of the leadership of the University of Bucharest, of the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Ministry of Education and Research and Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Protection and Elderly. In his speech, Mr. Dragoş Pâslaru, the minister of Labour acknowledged the roles social workers play in the life of people from vulnerable groups, underlining that Romanian authorities/society fail/s to accept its social problems. He mentioned that social workers are urged to intervene in empowering people in need to become socially active, by providing social services and not encourage dependence on social benefits. In a memorable joke at the end of his speech he invited participants to also »have a beer« in between the conference sessions. Before the first keynote speaker there was a pantomime play performed by a group of children and adolescents with speech and hearing disabilities from »Domnita Balasa« placement centre, General Directorate for Social Work and Child Protection, sector 6, Bucharest.

Dr. Rory Truell, the Secretary General of the International Federation of Social Workers delivered the first keynote speech of the conference, focusing on the role social workers play all over the world in alleviating poverty, in empowering communities and people coping with everyday challenges, or extraordinary events (e.g. tsunami, floods, wars). He showed that research reveals that investment in social work services are worth every penny (e.g. for every dollar invested there is a return of three dollars, as confirmed by research from Yale and Princeton universities) offering examples from Asia, Africa and Europe of social work interventions to change realities. He also suggested that social work research needs to be more visible and also closer to practice, encouraging practitioners and researchers to collaborate more.

After the coffee break participants attended the three parallel sessions. After each presentation, lively debates continued (sometimes during breaks). A nice welcome dinner ended the first day of the conference.

On the second day of the conference, after a first series of parallel sessions, the second keynote speaker, Professor Marian Preda, president of the Senate of the University of Bucharest and president of the conference, delivered his speech on social and demographic risks and vulnerabilities of Romanian social policies. Citing from Abraham Lincoln that a generation/parents should not indebt the future generation of their children, he pointed out that Romanian society seems »a risk-ignoring society«, with reference to the demographic decline of Romania and to its current disparities and inequities (e.g. rural vs. urban, old vs. children and youths)

which do not seem to be of much interest for decision-makers. A debate was generated by a sentence of Prof. Preda that there are people who don't want to work and simply wait for cash benefits to buy alcohol. Others questioned his statement, suggesting the risk of blaming the victims and that of joining the neoliberal discourse on the »deserving« and »un-deserving« poor.

The third main speech, by Professor Silvia Fargion from the Free University of Bolzano/Bozen, Italy, chair of the European Social Work Research Association, highlighted the theoretical perspectives of social work research and its role in changing realities and empowering communities. She suggested, following Mannheim's work, that practitioners seem prone to a Romantic style of thought while researchers are closer to an Enlightenment style of thought. These two could also be mirrored in the qualitative vs. quantitative approaches in social work research. Prof. Fargion also encouraged a mixed approach in social work, combining practice and research.

Conference sessions included presentations on social work practice and profession, human rights and vulnerable groups, social work with children and youths, social work with the elderly, families, domestic violence victims, deviance and social behaviour, social work education, diversity and social justice, international perspectives in social work, social work and international development and community social work.

Among the workshops organised we mention:

- »Clinical assessment and intervention for children with a history of abuse: a unifying experiential psychotherapy approach«. The aim of this workshop was to provide theoretical information and strategies to the participants for the assessment and treatment of children who have suffered various types of abuse and neglect. The workshop illustrated the fundamental applicability of experiential psychotherapy in working with abused and neglected children, preceded by some observations on the progress of the experiment.
- »Caring for children left behind by working with/in their communities«. The aim of this workshop was to identify the best practices or possible new practices to address a phenomenon already widely represented in Romania that can extend/aggravate the conditions of new forms of migration in Europe. It also focused on the ways in which communities can be involved in protecting children »left behind« due to their parents leaving to go to work abroad and prevent their separation from their own families.
- »Protection of domestic abuse victims. Experiences from specialists' practice«. This workshop was coordinated by the ANAIS Association whose main purpose is to promote respect and defend the rights of children,

young people and women. The Association aims to act in order to change the policies and legislation for the benefit of children, by recognising and focusing on the responsibilities and duties of parents, teachers and other authorities, also to prevent abandonment while promoting family reintegration by offering support to children and families in need. The association offers advice and support for parents and children (families at risk of abandoning their children, at risk of disintegrating families, single parents etc.), counselling and expertise in social, educational, child protection and health matters.

The organisers of the conference arranged three exhibitions (Butterflies as a symbol of transformation – the manufacture of heart shaped pillows was done by ladies from ABC Breast Care support groups; Jewellery exhibition; Photo Exhibition on the theme of homeless people in Bucharest entitled *No Direction home* by Iulian Ignat) and one movie projection (*Abreast*- a short biopic to show the struggle of a transgender in Romania).

Overall, the conference was a success as the aim of the conference »Envisioning Sustainable Social Work: Empowering Communities and Individuals«, was to seek to bring together educators, researchers, practitioners, and students from all areas of social science, who can envision a holistic approach to sustainability and its relevance to social work, social welfare and social policy. This holistic approach refers to extending the meaning and scope of sustainability so as to encompass the social, economic, political and environmental contextual factors that shape people's lives today and have an impact on the lives of future generations. It is an approach in which the person-in-the-environment paradigm, which has originally underpinned the founding of the social work profession, and continues being the overarching conceptual framework in social work, is restored to its full potential.

The chair of the conference, professor Adrian Dan concluded the conference by thanking all participants and honouring a group of dedicated volunteers (social work students), inviting us, in 2017, to the second SWIC conference in Bucharest.

The goal of the 2016 Social Work International Conference (SWIC) to contribute to building a knowledge-base that can reflect and support practice, research and theory that are grounded in the holistic approach to sustainability described above was fully accomplished.

Prepared by: Florin Lazar and Mirela Anghel