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Social work in Europe adapts to challenges of migration and exclusion

European society is changing and, with it, the nature of social work. Can new procedures be set up to meet the needs of refugees and displaced communities?

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When an international team of academics wrote up their research to help shape reform of the child protection system in Switzerland in 2014, they said: “Child protection has become, arguably, the public issue of our time.” So much has changed in the subsequent three years that social workers today might seek to qualify that claim.

Delegates attending next week’s European conference of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) in Reykjavík, Iceland, will debate child protection in the context of new challenges involving social and digital exclusion, and the movement of vast numbers of people to northern Europe in search of asylum, peace and a better life.

“It’s a core value of social work to aspire to a sustainable society in which everyone has a share of opportunities to participate as an active citizen,” says María Rúnarsdóttir, president of the

Icelandic Association of Social Workers, which is hosting the conference. “How do we promote sustainable communities? How do we ensure human rights for groups of people that are on the fringes of those communities?”

Debate at the conference - titled Marginalisation and Social Work in a Changing Society - will no doubt centre on the role of social work in these changing times. Is it to support the individual? Or is to challenge the system? This was a key strand of discussion at last year’s global IFSW conference.

The conference will also raise questions about the scope for sharing learning and good practice across borders. Is there enough? And, indeed, can it be done? The authors of that key research paper on the way forward for child protection in Switzerland, which was drawn from systems in five countries, certainly thought so.

Writing in the British Journal of Social Work, they concluded that the lessons, both positive and negative, were “remarkably consistent and coherent” and that international comparisons of practice were “both possible and desirable”.

But not everyone agrees that social work is dancing to the same beat. Paul Michael Garrett, director of social work at the National University of Ireland in Galway, is among those concerned at the direction the profession is taking - in the UK, in particular - and the wider influence that may be bringing to bear.

Garrett questions what lies behind what he terms the “re-enchantment” of social work with children and families in England through programmes such as Reclaiming Social Work - pioneered in Hackney, east London - and fast-track graduate recruitment schemes such as Frontline. Where proponents see positive innovation, he sees the creation of an elite movement turning its back on a discredited public sector in pursuit of a new, but false, sense of authenticity.

Crucially, Garrett fears a move towards playing down the malign backdrop of economic austerity and powerful global forces, in favour of emphasising people’s responsibility for shaping their own circumstances.

In Welfare Words, a book due to be published later this year, Garrett will argue that the professionally fashionable use of terms such as “resilience” and “grit” to describe strength of character points to a significant shift in approach.

“Yes, people need to be resilient,” he says, “but they need, as individuals and as members of empowering communities, to be adequately resourced as well. It’s a bringing together of the micro and the macro.”

The choice of Iceland for the IFSW conference is particularly apt in this context. The country suffered more than most in the global economic crash of 2008, but has since recovered swiftly and strongly, despite harsh cuts to public spending.

Rúnarsdóttir says her country now has the opportunity to set a positive example to others by reinvesting in social work and welfare protection. “We have done well in dealing with the economic crisis. But public services have needed to prioritise how they spent their money and we have had to fight for people on the lowest incomes. And perhaps that has meant a shift away from work around prevention.

“Now we need to think how we can get back to prevention, how we can be proactive rather than reactive. We need to be thinking 20 years ahead.”

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