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Promoting international social work discourse through conference participation: Praxis and the Solidarity Fund of Global Social Work 2004

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Elizabeth Moore and Manohar Pawar

Abstract

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The acceleration in the twentieth century of the pace and extent of globalisation of economic and social life heightens the importance of an international perspective on social work education, research and practice. Both the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work have a key role in promoting discourse and exchange. The Solidarity Fund is a mechanism through which these bodies have financially sponsored delegates from low income countries to promote their participation in their international conferences. An evaluation of the Fund administration for the 31st International Congress of Social Work, *Global Social Work 2004*, was based on quantitative data from conference registrations and Fund applications, interviews with Fund sponsored delegates and focus groups with conference delegates. Positive outcomes of this sponsorship included extending the number of low income countries represented at the Congress, providing individual delegates with valued opportunities to appreciate the perspective of ‘the professional other’ from a high or low income country and to forge professional relationships. Suggestions to improve the effectiveness of the Fund included administrative and systemic issues, the latter evidencing a shared commitment to operationalising social justice and promoting a sustainable global professional community.

Introduction

In 2004 the Australian social work professional and educational representational bodies hosted the International Global Social Work Congress in Adelaide, South Australia. In a profession that is preoccupied with alleviating social disadvantage and pursuing social justice principles through participation and equality, the high costs of travel, accommodation and registration of costs raise obvious concerns for organizers. Amongst other measures, the Australian organisers implemented a Solidarity Fund, previously established by the international social work community, to provide financial assistance to delegates of low income countries as a means to address the greater financial constraints to their participation. In this paper we briefly discuss the aims of the international social work community in promoting international professional discourse, and more fully the findings of our research into the specific contribution to that discourse, during *Global Social Work 2004*, of the Solidarity Fund. This participatory research was conducted in addition to the role of the lead author in administering the Solidarity Fund, and for both of us as Congress participants. The findings discussed here include evidence of the breadth of international representation, experiences of delegates sponsored by the Fund and the views of non-sponsored delegates about the Fund's use and potential.. As a reflection on our practice it provides opportunities for constructive criticism and ideas enhancing this approach in the future.

Globalising social work discourse

The acceleration in the twentieth century of the pace and extent of globalisation of economic and social life heightens the importance of an international perspective on social work education, research and practice. Professionals engaged in the local/global dialectic observe that complexities in this discourse arise from differing perspectives across practice

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contexts within a country as well as differences in its operationalisation between countries (Sewpaul & Jones 2004). The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) have adopted the following definition of social work to facilitate this discourse:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (IFSW quoted in Sewpaul & Jones 2004:2)

The aims and objectives of these professional representational bodies unequivocally emphasise international cooperation and exchange among social workers of all countries. For example, one of the aims of IFSW (2005) is to promote social work as a profession through international co-operation. Towards this it shall:

- encourage co-operation between social workers of all countries;
- provide means for discussion and the exchange of ideas and experience through meetings, study visits, research projects, exchanges, publications and other methods of communication (IFSW, 2005).

Similarly, one of the four IASSW mission statements is 'To support and facilitate participation in mutual exchanges of information and expertise' globally (2005).

Writers in international social work emphasise the importance of international professional exchange. According to Healy (2001), professional exchange is one of the core elements of international social work (see also Midgley, 1990). In our view this professional exchange needs to 'respond appropriately and effectively, in education and practice terms,

to the various global challenges that are having a significant impact on the well-being of large sections of the world's population' (Cox and Pawar, 2006). It could include a range of activities in social work education and practice. For example, exchange of curriculum and teaching methods, such as knowledge and skills, case studies, initial support to new schools, student and staff exchanges for practicum, visiting lectures, collaborative research projects, comparative studies, workshops/seminars/conferences and other such forums and professional interactions in these meetings, depending upon mutual areas of interest and need of those who are involved in exchanges.

In social work professional education, exchanges among schools, educators and students are often based on individual initiatives (for example see Dominelli and Bernard 2003; Pawar and Cox 2004; Cox, Pawar and Picton 1997). Those who have organised exchanges have identified that adequacy of funding and administrative support are major barriers, with exchanges often implemented through the good will and interest of those involved (Dominelli, 2003). Much needed exchanges such as this often might not occur unless professionals first meet face to face, establish rapport and share and develop mutual areas of interest.

International conferences provide an important platform for initiating such exchanges. If a country's context, particularly economic, is not favourable professionals find themselves incapacitated or prevented entirely from attending such conferences. This participation can be a first step towards developing international exchanges in social work, a vital precursor to other forms of professional exchange. If representatives from developing countries, are not able to participate in global conferences, they will be extremely disadvantaged in efforts to extend beyond national boundaries and share their particular experiences and hear of others'. While contemporary communications and information technology are

useful vehicles for such exchange, and increasingly accessed and utilised by social work professionals, they are not a substitute for direct meetings (see Pawar 2001).

The evaluation reported here demonstrates an additional benefit of participation in international conferences, that of collectively enacting and fostering agreement, integrity and sustainability in the development and continuation of the global social work professional community.

International Congress delegate sponsorship

The 31st International Congress of Social Work, *Global Social Work 2004* held in Adelaide, was under the auspice of the IFSW and IASSW, and hosted by their Australian equivalents, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) and Australian Association for Social Work and Welfare Education (AASWWE).

At a global conference of this scale, it is a minimum expectation that at least a few participants are represented from each country, particularly where professional social work education and practice exists. In recognition of this the conference organising committee established a Solidarity Fund (the Fund) as a mechanism through which delegates from low income countries could be financially sponsored, thus promoting their participation.

Congress publicity materials described the Fund in the following terms:

Solidarity Fund participants from low income countries are invited to apply for subsidised funds to help with travel, accommodation and/or conference attendance.

These categories include most countries of Africa and many counties in Latin America, Asia and Eastern Europe. Funds are strictly limited and the Solidarity Fund committee reserves the right to approve partial funding only (Global Social Work 2004, Publicity Flyer).

As well as administering the Fund, the AASWWE Executive funded the evaluation reported here, thus reflecting the AASWWE Executive's commitment to the following mission statement:

The Australian Association of Social Work and Welfare Education is committed to ensuring high quality support and information exchange for educators in the field of teaching, research and educational policy development. (AASWWE

<http://www.aaswwe.asn.au/research/res0001.htm> Accessed 28/6/04)

The decision to evaluate the Fund and the approach to evaluation were both informed by issues arising from its administration. Fund administrators observed the complexity of the decisions to grant funds, the level of funding and the grants administration process. One dilemma involved determining the level of financial assistance to offer each applicant from the limited and indeterminate budget². On the one hand, too little funding might not enable a successful applicant to participate at all, due to their inability to raise the shortfall between the financial assistance and the actual costs. On the other, generous funding of individual applicants would reduce the total number of applicants who could be assisted.

Other issues that emerged through Fund administration included: i) the high financial costs of registration, travel and accommodation (up to \$A5,000); ii) administrative constraints that enabled only advance payment of conference registration, with additional funds to support travel and/or accommodation being provided upon the Solidarity Fund sponsored delegate (the Fellow) attending the Congress registration desk; iii) partial funding being insufficient for some Fellows, due to their inability to raise the shortfall between the sponsorship and actual costs; vi) some applicants did not understand the submission process for Congress abstracts or Fund sponsorship; vii) some joint applications were made

² While a portion of the total budget was known in advance, the remaining funds were obtained through a levy struck on each registration and thus determined by the eventual number of registrations.

in an effort to obtain mutual personal, cultural and language support for the applicants in the foreign country and conference environment.

Evaluating the representational aim of the Solidarity Fund

The fundamental question of the evaluation was: 'Did the Solidarity Fund contribute to the achievement of increased participation of low Gross Domestic Product (GDP) countries by Congress delegates?' However, it also sought to identify barriers to this goal within the Fund administration and strategies through which the Fund can be developed to increase opportunities for professional exchange about education, practice and research between social workers in countries with high and low GDP.

Evaluating the effectiveness of the Solidarity Fund required an interrogation of the grants process and outcomes, based on the Fund records. This, combined with information from interviews and focus groups provided answers to the following questions: i) What countries were represented amongst Congress and Solidarity Fund applicants and Fellows? ii) What were the perceptions and experiences of the assistance provided and barriers to Congress participation of Solidarity Fund Fellows? iii) What suggestions did Congress delegates and Fellows have for improving the Fund administration in ways that would increase the representation of delegates from the least developed countries?

Evaluation – method, limitations and ethics

The evaluation adopted an action research method, with the experience of Fund administration informing the research questions. It is also a participatory model, with one of the research partners also having been a member of the AASWWE subcommittee that administered the Fund. A mix of quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection was used, the former being the interrogation of non personalised records of Congress registrations and of Solidarity Fund applications, and qualitative techniques being

interviews of Fellows attending the Congress and focus group discussion with Fellows and non-Fellow Congress delegates. In this way a degree of triangulation of data was also achieved.

Non personalised Congress registration data established the profile of countries represented by delegates. Access to records of the grants administration process established the profile of applicants' countries and enabled contact with Fellows for the purpose of inviting their participation in a survey. Focus group discussions held during the Congress obtained a wider range of perspectives about the function of the Fund by obtaining the views of delegates who were not Fellows.

Research limitations include the lack of translation to promote and conduct the research activities and the Congress venue as the research site. All survey and focus group participants spoke English, and the simplicity of the research questions resulted in little apparent difficulty in communication between the researchers and participants. Although language barriers might have more likely limited the participation of delegates not fluent in English in focus group discussion, these groups contributed the additional perspective of delegates from English speaking high GDP countries. Negotiating the Congress arrangements of large venue, large number of delegates (N=1,118) and extremely full program of parallel sessions presented difficulties in recruiting participants and securing a private and quiet space for discussion. Focus groups were rushed and interrupted with the resultant disappointing loss, through technical error, of the audio track of one of the four focus group discussions of six delegates.

Another limitation was obtaining only the views of two of the 17 Fellows who relinquished their sponsorship by not attending the Congress. Their limited resources meant that few communicated using direct internet or email access, most relying on low/no cost providers

with access to services being limited or unreliable. While Fellows who attended the Congress confront similar barriers to their participation, a complete picture would require the views of Fellows who did not take up their grant.

Charles Sturt University's research ethics requirements were followed, with approval granted by the Ethics in Research Committee prior to data collection. The project details were also provided to the Committees responsible for Congress organisation and Solidarity Fund administration as well as the IFSW and IASSW, and their consent obtained to access records and recruit research participants. Standard ethical practices – informing aims and objectives of the project, voluntary participation, confidentiality, withdrawal from the study at any time and directions for complaining, if any, were followed to obtain informed consent from participants.

Data collection and analysis

Survey of Solidarity Fund Fellow delegates

The purpose of the survey of Fellows who attended the Congress was to identify the inherent opportunities and barriers for those who did and did not take up the grant.

Invitations to participate were made at the Congress registration desk. The survey was administered through a private interview conducted in English without translation, with the interviewers writing the responses. Following a brief information statement participants were invited to provide biographical details that enabled a profile of survey participants to be generated, and to respond to the four questions in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Survey Solidarity Fund Fellows

1. Tell me about an aspect of the Solidarity Fund that worked well for you.
2. Is there an aspect of the Solidarity Fund that did not work well for you?
3. Can you think of three ways to improve the administration of the Solidarity Fund?
4. Suggest some ways the Solidarity Fund could be used to improve international

exchange within social work practice and education.

Focus group discussions – Congress delegates

During the Congress, delegates were invited to participate in focus group discussion about their expectations and experience of the Congress as an opportunity for international professional exchange and strategies for promoting this. Facilitated in English without translation, discussion was focused around the three questions in Figure 2, with notes taken by the facilitator and an audio recording taken on CD Rom for transcription.

Figure 2: Focus group discussion

1. What were your reasons for attending the Congress?
2. What expectations did you have for international professional exchange?
3. Can you think of some ways such conferences can increase the exchange of ideas between social work practitioners, researchers and educators from low and high GDP countries?

Data analysis

The collected data were examined to confirm the consistency of responses and eliminate information gaps. Then frequency distributions were used to quantify secondary registration, application and survey data for descriptive purposes. Focus group data were subjected to thematic analysis. In this paper we report the findings pertaining to Solidarity Fund administration of this Congress.

Countries represented – Congress and Solidarity Fund

Interrogating the records of Congress registration and Solidarity Fund grants administration provided the profile of international representation for each.

Congress Registration

The 64 participant countries were visible to Congress delegates at the opening ceremony roll call, and conference organisers provided a full record of Congress registration statistics by country. The highest representation was of high GDP countries. As Table 1 shows, 70% of delegates were from Australia, United States of America, Japan, United Kingdom and New Zealand.

As might be expected, Australians accounted for the largest percentage (46%) of delegates due to Adelaide, the Australian capital city location, making it relatively less costly in time and money for many to attend. For 16 (25%) countries there were ten or more delegates, these countries thus accounting for 87% of the total delegates. Of these 16 only South Africa and Korea were considered eligible for Solidarity Fund subsidy.

Table 1: Registration statistics – countries accounting for great majority of delegates

Country	No. of delegates	% of total delegates	Cumulative %
Australia	515	46.0	46.0
United States of America	78	7.0	53.0
Japan	66	6.0	59.0
United Kingdom	63	5.9	64.9
New Zealand	60	5.6	70.5
Korea	29	2.6	73.1
Canada	28	2.5	75.6
Finland	20	1.8	77.4
Germany	20	1.8	79.2
South Africa	17	1.5	80.7
Norway	15	1.3	82.0
Israel	14	1.2	83.2
Denmark	11	1.0	84.2
Singapore	11	1.0	85.2
Sweden	11	1.0	86.2
Austria	10	0.9	87.1
Total	968	87.1	87.1

Note: Percentage of 87.1 is slightly inflated on actual of 86.6 due to rounding.

Solidarity Fund

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i) *The grants process*

The existence of the Solidarity Fund was briefly described on Congress publicity materials, both printed and electronic, and inquiries directed to the contracted conference organisers. Conference organising staff forwarded a printed or electronic copy of the application form written in English. Applicants completed the form and returned it by email, facsimile or post. Conference organisers forwarded applications to the Solidarity Fund administrative committee for consideration. Upon request of the Congress organising committee the final date for applications was extended by two weeks.

The large number of applications (97) and limited funds resulted in the adoption of the following additional five eligibility criteria for decisions to award grants:

- 1) maximising the number of countries funded
- 2) applicant's presentation accepted for delivery at the Congress
- 3) applicant provided evidence of actively contributing to a social work professional body in their country
- 4) applicant provided evidence of actively contributing to the development of a social work educational initiative in their country.
- 5) applicant is a research student who might not get access to other funds.

The Solidarity Fund for this Congress was commenced with funds passed from a previous international conference and donations obtained within the host country by the AASWWE Executive. The Congress fund raising process, of striking a \$A20 levy on registrations, meant that the total budget could not be known in advance. Thus, allocations were made in two stages. A first round of grants was offered to applicants that covered Congress registration in all cases and for a smaller number a contribution to travel costs was awarded

proportionate to the total estimated cost. Fellows were informed by letter and asked to confirm their acceptance by registering for the Congress. They were also encouraged to use the letter of offer to support their efforts to seek additional financial assistance locally. The eventual large number of registrations increased the amount of funding, thus enabling a second stage distribution that involved topping up the grants with an additional proportion of travel costs.

Thus, all Fellows were granted complimentary conference registration, with those who sought additional financial support being provided with a proportion of the cost of their air fare. The air fare subsidy was up to 30% for fares estimated to cost less than \$A1,500 and up to 50% for fares estimated to cost more than \$A1,500. The travel subsidy was provided as cash in Australian currency upon presenting at the Congress registration desk.

ii) Applications and grants – representation and uptake

Table 2: Summary of individual and country participation in Solidarity Fund

Stage of process application/acceptance process	Individuals		Countries	
	No.	%	No.	%
Applications received	97	100	32	100
Applications granted to Solidarity Fund Fellows	47	48	26	81
Solidarity Fund Fellows who registered	40	41	21	66
Solidarity Fund Fellows who registered and attended	30	31	15	47

Table 2 provides a summary of representation at each stage of the application and acceptance process for each country, with 97 applications, 47 (48%) grants offered, 40 (41%) of grants accepted and 30 (31%) attending the Congress.

Table 2 also shows that the 97 applicants represented 32 countries, with 26 (81%) countries being represented by Fellows and 21 (66%) by those who registered and 15 (47%) by Fellows who attended the Congress. For the following seven countries the Fellow/s

was/were the only delegate/s and accounted for 11% of countries represented at the Congress:

- Bolivia
- Botswana
- Jamaica
- Malaysia
- Mongolia
- Pakistan
- Zimbabwe

An additional four countries not represented by other Congress delegates were represented amongst the applications. Fellows from Kazakhstan, Romania and Turkey relinquished their grants by not attending. Two applications from Palestine were declined due to their not meeting any of the five selection criteria and Palestine was not represented at the Congress.

An additional 13 applications from countries that were represented by other Congress delegates did not result in a grant being offered and accepted. Countries represented by these applicants were Cameroon, China, Colombia, Ghana, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Nepal, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam.

Also worth noting is that, while Indigenous Australians, who are overrepresented amongst the Australian population on all indicators of social and economic disadvantage, were eligible to apply for a Solidarity Fund subsidy, none applied. They were, however represented amongst Congress delegates and presenters, as were Canadian and New Zealand First Nations peoples who share a similar history of colonisation.

Of the 47 successful Solidarity Fund Fellows, 40 (85%) indicated their acceptance by registering for the Congress and 30 (64%) registered and attended the Congress.

Thus, the success rate for applications was 48% and the uptake rate by Fellows for the grants was 64%. The attrition in the uptake rate resulted in some unspent funds that the Congress organising committee subsequently passed on to Solidarity Funds of two forthcoming international conferences.

Countries represented in survey and focus groups

From the biographical data provided by survey and focus group participants the profiles summarised in Tables 3 and 4 were obtained.

Table 3: Countries represented by survey participants.

Country	Participant no.	Participant %
Bangladesh	1	4.5
Bolivia	2	9
Chile	1	4.5
India	4	18
Fiji	2	9
Malaysia	1	4.5
Mongolia	1	4.5
Pakistan	1	4.5
Papua New Guinea	1	4.5
Philippines	1	4.5
Russia	1	4.5
South Africa	5	23
Zimbabwe	1	4.5
Total	22	99.5*

Note: Total less than 100 due to small numbers and rounding error.

Table 3 shows the high survey participation rate, with 73% of Fellows, accounting for 86% of all Fellows' countries.

Table 4: Countries represented by focus group participants.

Country	Participant no.	Participant %
Australia	8	33
Bangladesh	1	4
India	4	17
Pakistan	1	4
Philippines	2	8
New Zealand	2	8
Singapore	1	4
South Africa	3	13

United States of America	2	8
Total	24	99*

Note: Total less than 100 due to small numbers and rounding error.

Focus groups were conducted for data triangulation purposes and not intended as representative of Congress delegates. The profile of countries represented shows that this provided a mechanism to obtain the views of delegates who were not Fellows and were from high GDP countries. Australia, India and South Africa had the highest representation, other countries having only one or two representatives.

The Congress experience

While this evaluation does not purport to represent delegates' experiences of the Congress, the expectations and experiences of participants provides a useful context in which to appreciate the particular contribution of the Solidarity Fund.

On the positive side, many participants regarded the Congress as broadening their professional perspective beyond their own country to a global view, and stimulating critical thought. This is illustrated in the following quotations from focus group participants:

For me I am from a developing country. By listening to many of the presentations, I realised that in terms of social justice and welfare, we are far far away from the developed countries, and my country needs a lot of things to be done. I don't know where to take it or not, but at least I have a picture of how other countries are trying to build human rights and justice for all people. (Focus group participant from low GDP country)

I have already got so much. It's about getting a sense of belonging to something that is bigger than my own country. Breaking down that parochial wall. I'm seeing far beyond now, some of the issues that were there before. Feeling a sense of wanting to contribute too. To organisations that want to run these kind of

conferences, and that sense that across the world, there is work to be done... (Focus group participant from high GDP country).

Another main positive experience for participants was networking. This occurred at two levels – meeting up with known colleagues and making new connections; talking with people and exchanging ideas; the process of preparing, delivering and discussing their own paper helped develop further ideas. It opened up collaborative possibilities for research, student exchange programs or partnerships.

Congress delegates whose first language was not English experienced language as a barrier to their full participation in the Congress. This was due to translation of Congress proceedings being limited to four languages in all plenary sessions, and one of each of the fifteen scheduled groups of six or more parallel sessions. It was reported that in many parallel sessions presentations were in English and were rushed with little apparent concern for people whose first language is not English. Appreciation was expressed for speakers who endeavoured to make their information understood orally and through audio visual aids and handouts.

Another critical perspective on the achievement of international exchange was a perception of the power imbalance of professional representation at the Congress. Representational issues were based on observations about the low or absent representation of many low GDP countries; the small representation of students and practitioners; and the gender imbalance of a seemingly high representation of males despite social work being a female dominated profession. The issue of power imbalance and access and equity in regard to participation in international Congresses was seen as evidence of the need for the social work profession to more effectively pursue its central ethos of social justice advocacy within the global professional landscape.

Congress costs no doubt contribute to the representational bias toward high GDP countries and seniority within the profession. While the Solidarity Fund did achieve increased access for professionals from low GDP countries, it is worth noting that the profile of Fellows revealed that a majority (78%) held senior leadership positions. The issue of Congress representation of all levels of the profession is beyond the scope of this study. However, participants observed that many school of social work educators and practitioners were interested in attending the conference, but were discouraged by the limited subsidy of registration funding. Many observed the Congress costs as a barrier to equitable access and representation of the profession.

Financial constraints of people from low GDP countries; did not expect a social work conference to be so expensive as this conference is very expensive compared to other conferences... (participant from low GDP country)

Even coming from USA, I found the costs challenging as conference and travel expenses are high; I am attending the conference in my vacation time with no support from my employer; only because of my second job undertaken on weekends could I afford to attend. (Focus group participant from high GDP country)

Even coming from Australia, costs to attend the conference are high as travelling within Australia is usually some distance; practitioners from non-government organisations and some government departments would not be financially supported to be here. (Focus group participant from high GDP country)

Experiences of Solidarity Fund Fellow delegates

Table 5: Fellow delegates' positive experiences of the Solidarity Fund

Aspects	No. of responses
Financial Support	20

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Participation/Networking/Learning	7
Good for developing countries	6
Process	5
Timely payment/Cash payment	4
Country/social work representation	2
Letter increased local support	2
Home stay	1
Complimentary dinner	1
Other	6

Note: Multiple responses were allowed, so the total responses is not equal to total respondents.

What worked well?

Responses to the invitation to survey participants to ‘Tell me about an aspect of the Solidarity Fund that worked well for you’ are summarised in Table 5.

For the majority the core aspect was financial support. A number of participants stated that without such support, they would not have attended the conference.

Without the support it was not possible to attend. I was not able to afford the total cost due to my low income. For example, the total cost of attending the conference was equal to half of my annual income.

Many variants of financial and related support - travel assistance, complimentary registration, and timely cash assistance/payment, a letter of notification of financial support (as it helped to raise additional funding locally), complimentary dinner and home stay - were appreciated. Five respondents appreciated the process of providing the subsidy selectively, and believed the process was handled well. A simple form, advance notification of the level of support and a quick reply were all helpful. Treating all applicants equally was also important as people from the same country experienced similar outcomes. The following responses suggest that the Fund is good for developing countries

as social workers are able to represent their profession and country and learn and develop global networks with other participants.

This is the first time I have attended an international conference. It is very important to me and the school of social work and for the whole of my country.

We share our experience and learn from more experienced people. Good to be notified in advance of level of support. The letter was helpful in raising more funds locally.

A participant stated that an effective operation of such a fund is important as it creates hope and facilitates participation of people in the conference.

I would not have tried to come to this conference, if there had not been a hopewhile I was travelling to this place there was big news because of the economic cuts, no support (to academics) for participation in workshops and conferences as an economic measure has been announced by the government. So I believe that this kind of encouragement within the system will definitely facilitate the people.

What did not work well?

In response to the question: 'Is there an aspect of the Solidarity Fund that did not work well for you?' one-third of the respondents stated "none", implicitly suggesting that all worked well for them. Analysis of the remaining responses showed that the financial support provided by the Fund was not adequate in that it did not cover travel (n=7) and accommodation costs (n=2).

A participant stated:

... the total cost to attend this program is half of my annual income. Can you

imagine? I am telling you honestly. So how can a person from my country or other

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low income countries dream of attending? It is a real dream, a real dream to be fulfilled.

Participants were really concerned about the amount of funding allocation, which, as the following response shows, has created a lot of anxiety and distress in them. They had to search for additional funding and such a search often yielded no, or a discouraging, response.

During the last seven or eight months, I was really tense and distressed because how could I attend the Australian conference? It was a really horrible experience, making applications to funding bodies with different rules and regulations.

Guidelines are different. Preparation of the application form, making photocopies of all papers, and posting those applications to respective agencies and waiting for the reply. Again, if there is no reply then you send a reminder. That's why we were busy for four or five months. That disturbs the writing of the paper. While for quality we want to continue with the paper, we have to remain busy with fundraising.

Despite that:

...I have not got a single money from any of the organisations, except for the money I received from here (Solidarity Fund). The amount of money and the tension we have undergone is tremendous. For example, writing the paper and submitting is one part of it. But then waiting for your response. Asking have you got any mail from them? So he says, yes, yes, I have got. So I ask, what is the response? To find out and finalise a lot of networking has gone on. I'm not exaggerating; I am telling you a fact.

There were nine responses that indicated that the application process did not work well for reasons of: the timing of the notification for funding coming too late to organise visa and travel (n=2); the application process being unclear (n=2); more information needed about eligibility and assistance (n=2); communication failure in the individual application process and overall lack of clarity in the information about registration (n=2).

One of the significant aspects affecting their ability to take up the funding was the visa application process. Issues included the time frame, costs and information required and the unexpected visa administration fee. One participant was asked to provide evidence of a specific amount of money in a bank deposit as part of the visa application process, a requirement that few could meet.

Other issues raised, though with single frequency, were distance of the conference venue from home country, specific criteria for funding and disparity between countries. There was also a perception that information about the Fund is kept secretive amongst people who know about it. For some participants it was difficult to organise and finalise plans for the trip prior to being advised of the funding amount. Two Fellows lost two days on a bus journey, having not anticipated the approximately 1,400 kilometre distance between Sydney, the city of their flight arrival and the Adelaide conference location. One Fellow reported that the extra costs associated with travel within Australia resulted in additional unexpected costs of \$A1504, hence:

It is not sufficient to just provide registration and airfare support to people from developing countries as they require resources within Australia such as taxi vouchers.

Some delegates who used home stay accommodation in Adelaide gained helpful information, practical assistance and hospitality. A down side for others was the long

distance between their home stay accommodation and the Congress and the resultant costs in time and money.

How might Solidarity Fund administration be improved?

Responses to the question: ‘Can you think of three ways to improve the administration of the Solidarity Fund?’ generated ideas, many of which were more fully addressed in focus group discussions. In this section we discuss suggestions from both fora. Suggestions were specific to the grants administrative process, while others address broader systemic issues, the latter evidencing a shared commitment to operationalising social justice and promoting a sustainable global professional community.

Our focus on the administration of the Solidarity Fund of *Global Social Work 2004* provided Fellows the opportunity to reflect on their experience and make specific suggestions about the administrative arrangements that addressed Fellows’ positive and negative experiences. These were detailed in a report provided to representatives of the four Congress organising bodies, IFSW, IASSW, AASW and AASWWE. Suggestions on the grants administration process addressed: information to applicants, selection criteria, application process, grant allocation, notification of outcome and provision of grant. While some suggestions were operational there was a preoccupation, both explicit and implicit, with operationalising social justice principles in the conference arrangements and recognition of the strategic importance of the Solidarity Fund to this end.

Information to applicants

These suggestions reflect the social justice principles of equitable access to information as well as transparency and accountability in administration. It was explained that conference publicity materials should feature the Solidarity Fund and provide access to a detailed

guideline, including eligibility criteria, level of funding, application form, decision making mechanism, form and timing of notification of outcome and expectations of and support offered to Fellows. Conferences and the Fund should be widely publicised in relevant media, both electronic and print. Effective dissemination of information in the global professional community would include newsletters of international, regional and national social work associations and other organisations with which social work educators, researchers and practitioners engage, such as faith based and other non-government agencies.

Selection criteria

The most extensive and detailed suggestions focused on the selection criteria. Participants perceived the Fund as strategically important in contributing toward the development of a global professional community that shares an ethos of redressing systemic disadvantage through practice, education and research. Discussion reflected the professional socialisation role of such conferences in nurturing early career practitioners and researchers. For participants, conference participation was not the outcome, but a step in building the knowledge, ethos, skills and partnerships of a global professional community for the pursuit of social justice.

In solving its funds allocation dilemma, the Committee introduced additional funding criteria, some of which were considered favourably by participants. In particular, supporting applicants who had a conference presentation accepted, contributors to local professional bodies, those promoting the development of social work education locally and students. Support of practitioners in innovative, challenging and under funded areas of practice in both low and high GDP countries was also suggested, especially from the non-government/non-profit sector, because:

Practitioners are not well represented at the conference; universities have funding set aside for this purpose, whereas other organisations do not. Practitioners might have more difficulties such as getting leave, childcare and associated issues to attend conference.

It was suggested that targeting funds to such practitioners and early career researchers be achieved by quarantining a proportion, say 50% of funds for this target group and providing a higher level of funding than for others. The justification for this was that while early career conference delegates might have access to lower cost options for accommodation and travel concessions, it is more difficult for them to get access to such conferences than it is for professors and senior practitioners.

Another suggestion aimed to ensure that the applicant alone did not benefit from the conference experience, but that the global and local social work communities also benefited. Applicants could be asked to provide evidence in their application of their contribution to the conference, minimum level of practice or teaching experience and ability to disseminate locally the professional knowledge gained from the conference.

Suggestions to overcome inequality within the profession led some to conclude that the distinction between low and high GDP countries might not adequately address global inequality. There was acknowledgment that the criteria should take account of differences within low GDP countries, such as income differences or in the extent to which the social work profession is established and resourced. While there was a consensus that the Fund should target applicants from low GDP countries, flexibility to take account of disadvantaged and marginalised populations within both low and high GDP countries, such as First Nations or refugee people was considered important. So there was a view that a

policy of simply targeting low GDP countries might not address the needs of the profession globally.

Application process

In light of the language, cultural and communication issues that arise in a global operating environment, it was also suggested that regional or local contacts be nominated to provide guidance and support to applicants. The need for guidance and support also underpinned the suggestion to encourage joint applications from a single country as a means to provide language and cultural support and the opportunity for collaborative planning, abstract submission and preparation of conference presentation, fund raising and budgeting, travel and conference participation.

Grant allocation

While applicants appreciated fairness in the adoption of a formula to determine the level of funding, there was concern that a different formula was needed to overcome differences discussed that were not reflected in the low/high GDP distinction.

Notification of outcome

Operating in the international environment involves negotiating the immigration and security regimes of the host country. An original print version of the conference organisers' letter of notification of the grant is an important document. It provides evidence needed for applicants to seek additional local funding and to apply for a visa. In the contemporary climate of heightened international security a degree of advocacy would assist the visa application process. It was thought that this could be achieved through an additional measure of notifying the host country consulate office in the Fellows' home country of the support provided to attend the conference. One justification follows:

One of my colleagues, who is supposed to present a paper today did not show up. I don't know what happened. Maybe this is a problem of money. The other concern is the issue of terrorism (which) makes it difficult for people to get a visa to come to this country. Particularly my country, with the issue of the recent bomb. There is a possibility that a visa did not get given by the government of Australia. ...

(Survey participant)

The associations of social work need to advocate for people from developing countries to attend, for example by facilitating visa applications. (Survey participant)

Provision of grant

Finally both the timing and form of the grant provided were issues. The mechanism for providing the grants had to strike a balance between immediate assistance and avoiding the the administrative costs involved in exchange rates, bank transfers and seeking repayment of grants not eventually taken up by Fellows. Complimentary registration provided immediate assistance and increased the size of the total budget though gaining approval for a reduced registration fee for Fellows. Supplementary travel assistance in cash was intended to allow Fellows to apply it to either travel or accommodation. Some would have preferred the choice of cash or in kind assistance such as registration, and of applying the assistance to registration, travel or accommodation. Some would have simply preferred payment of an honorarium to assist their presentation. This reflected the need for flexibility that took account of their particular situation.

Discussion

Clearly the Congress achieved its goal of encouraging global participation and discourse. Its success is evidenced by the 1,118 registered delegates who represented

64 countries and the many positive comments of the few delegates who participate in this research. The Solidarity Fund achieved its aim of increasing the representation of low GDP countries amongst Congress delegates. This is evidenced by Solidarity Fund Fellows accounting for 30 (2.6%) delegates who represented 32 (50%) of the 64 countries, and Fellows from seven countries being the only representative of a low GDP country. Reflections on their Congress experience of Fellows and other delegates demonstrate the high value they placed on this opportunity for international exchange and for a global perspective on their profession. Fellows reported the value of the Solidarity Fund, without which many would not have participated in the Congress. Their comments on the positive aspects and limitations of the funding process provided guidance for enhancing administrative effectiveness at all stages. Perhaps more significantly Fellows and other delegates who participated in this study appreciated the strategic importance of the Fund for facilitating international professional exchange. While that discussion is worthy of another paper, the findings reported here show that participant suggestions were framed around the larger systemic issue of embedding the social work professional ethos within global conferences arrangements. Suggestions included a desire for social work lead organisations to provide a model for other organisations to follow.

Need to be more thorough in thinking about the processes we engage in and what they stand for, including the way forums are organised. (Focus group participant from high GDP country)

Two implementation issues grounded in this perspective were the desire to minimise the extravagance and cost of international conference arrangements and to move away from the establishment of ad hoc conference specific equity funding. There was a concern to establish the Solidarity Fund as a permanent continuing programme of the

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IFSW and IASSW and equivalent regional and national professional bodies of both high and low GDP countries. The purposes articulated here included creating a mechanism to: increase the representation at international social work conferences of educators, researchers and practitioners engaged with the least empowered countries and population groups; to increase the participation of educators and practitioners who are introducing social work structures locally; to increase the participation of practitioners and early career researchers; and to create a conference environment that mirrors the professional ethos of equality, advocacy and support in its physical arrangements and interpersonal exchange.

Conclusion

As the social work profession constructs a platform on which to build international discourse about global injustice and inequality and its amelioration, it is important to introduce measures such as the Solidarity Fund that aim to mitigate against inequities in opportunities to participate. This study provides an opportunity for international and national representational bodies to reflect on the efficacy of measures taken to redress these, and consider the risks of oppressive practice in the name of good intentions, such as imperialist cultural domination or the application of principles of deservingness. The outcomes of the Solidarity Fund of Global Social Work 2004 combined with the voices of Fellows and delegates who attended the Congress provide some valuable insights that can inform future strategies to pursue inclusion. The Solidarity Fund is only one of many mechanisms through which to encourage international professional discourse. At the structural level, conference costs could be minimised and at the ameliorative level an ongoing and partnership approach could contribute to a sustained effort toward inclusiveness.

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