

The International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres: Celebrating 80 years and Committing to a New Future

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Good evening friends and colleagues in the Settlement House Movement. This is a great day as we celebrate the 80th anniversary of the founding of IFS -- the International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres. The spirit of this special conference, the obvious care and commitment of its planners, and the enthusiastic participation of all of you make this night and this time together very special. I'm delighted to be here in this wonderful city speaking to you about our movement – relishing its history, but more importantly calling out what I think is its challenging future.

Our dear friend and colleague, Bernie Wohl, may he rest in peace, gave us a glimpse of the future we can expect when he recently wrote, “Settlements are unique institutions. No agency I know of has the breadth and penetration that a settlement does...In our intense struggle to deliver human services with all the excellence and ardor at our command we have neglected our own history. Except in a few instances we have forgotten the lessons of settlement history to combine and integrate the struggles for services and policies, the local and the global immediate needs and the struggle for the future. We have to tap those living roots.”

Bernie's assessment is on the mark -- the Settlement movement has a long and proud history of working to strengthen local communities in our society, but its future depends on engaging citizens in the quest for just and responsive communities. But before expanding on the kind of future we face and its imperative for rejuvenating the movement, let me take a few moments to recall our rich history.

The movement started with the foundation of Settlements in large cities in the United Kingdom, the United States and other countries in the late 19th century. The key idea was that people concerned about social issues can only be effective in working for improvements if they have direct experience with the existing problems, by living among people in need and 'settling' into their neighborhoods. The most influential attempt with regard to the Settlement movement began in 1873, when the newly married Samuel Augustus Barnett, a 30-year old curate in the Church of England, and Henrietta Rowland went to live in St. Jude's parish in the East End of London. Barnett became increasingly concerned with the causes of the poverty about him. He proposed the establishment of a University Settlement in his parish so that privileged students and disadvantaged local residents could live as neighbors and improve local conditions together.

The Universities Settlement in London was established in 1884 and named Toynbee Hall, following the early death of historian Arnold Toynbee, a key supporter at Oxford University. The importance of the mutuality of the relationship between people from different backgrounds within the Settlement framework cannot be overstated: through direct personal encounter people were enabled to go beyond appearances and preconceptions and to get to know and value the individuality and humanity of other people, thus leading to greater respect for others and for themselves and a stronger sense of community.

Also in 1884, another Settlement, Oxford House, opened in London and the idea of promoting social justice through Settlements in poor areas caught on fast. In the next two decades over 20 Settlements were established in the United Kingdom. The first Settlements were in London but before the turn of the century Settlements were started in other cities including Manchester, Glasgow, Liverpool and Birmingham.

Several Toynbee Hall residents and visitors came from abroad and in this way the Settlement idea spread to other industrialized countries. In 1886, Stanton Coit founded the "Neighborhood Guild" (later renamed "University Settlement") in the lower East Side of New York; one year later alumnae of Smith College formed the "College Settlements Association"; and in 1889 Jane Addams established "Hull House" in Chicago. As large-scale immigration was an important issue, many of the early United States Settlements were established specifically to provide services for immigrants and refugees from other countries and societies. By the turn of the century there were more than 100 Settlement houses in the United States cities including Boston, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles, and 10 years later the figure had risen to some 400.

Settlements were started elsewhere in Europe and North America:

- *The "Centres Sociaux" in France* had forerunners in "Maisons Sociales" like "L'Union des Familles", which emerged from the work of Madame de Pressencé with the wives of the Paris Communards in the 1870s.
- In the 1880s and 1890s *Canada* laid the foundation of Settlements responding to the poverty of people moving into large cities as industrial workers, including the Fred Victor Mission in Toronto in 1884, Alexandra Community Activities Society in Vancouver in 1894, the Evangelia Settlement in Toronto in 1902, and 3 more Settlement houses in the same city between 1910 and 1912: University Settlement, Central Neighbourhood House and St. Christopher House.

- In *Helsinki*, the Finnish Settlement movement proper started in 1918 with the foundation of "The Evangelical Society of Industrial Areas" and "Kalliola Settlementii" by Reverend Sigfrid Sirenus, who had been strongly influenced by a stay at Robert Browning Settlement in London.
- In 1892 "Ons Huis" (Our Home) was established in *Amsterdam*.
- *The first Settlement in Japan* was "Kingsley-Kan" (Kingsley Hall) in Tokyo, established by Sen Katayama in 1897 on the model of Toynbee Hall. After a slow start, the Japanese Settlement movement grew fast in the "Taisho" era, with 43 new Settlements founded between 1917 and 1926.
- *In Germany*, Professor Walter Classen established the "Hamburger Volksheim" in 1901. Further neighborhood centers emerged in large towns like Karlsruhe, Leipzig, Worms and Stuttgart, and in 1910 Professor Friedrich Siegmund-Schultze established the "Soziale Arbeitsgemeinschaft Berlin-Ost" in Berlin.
- *In Austria*, Viennese women founded "Wiener Settlement" in 1901, with Elke Federn as first director and Dr. Karl Renner as President. Dr. Renner later became the President of the First Republic of Austria.
- In 1905, community centers were established *in Moscow and "Birkagården"* was founded in Stockholm in 1912 to increase the self-reliance of the local working-class population.
- *In Hungary*, after a stay at Toynbee Hall, Rezsö Hilscher started a Settlement in Budapest in 1913 following the foundation of a first rural Settlement two years earlier.

In the early years of the 20th century Settlements began to establish closer links with each other and the first formal associations started to emerge. In the United States, the "National Federation of Settlements," known today as United Neighborhood Centers of America or UNCA, was formed in 1911 with Jane Addams as President and Robert Woods as first executive.

In many European countries, there was a burst of activity after World War I with the foundation of new centers and associations. In France, attempts to establish a national federation started in 1920, and in the United Kingdom, the "Federation of Residential Settlements" was founded in 1920 (today known as BASSAC, the "British Association of Settlements & Social Action Centers"). Contacts among national federations led to proposals to form an international association, with the United States taking a lead role through Ellen Coolidge and Lillie M. Peck. A first international conference of Settlement workers was held at Toynbee Hall in July 1922 and was chaired by Henrietta Barnett. In 1924, the United States and British federations established the Barnett Fellowship to enable study visits between the two countries. Finally, in July 1926, the "International Association of Settlements" (today the "International Federation of Settlements & Neighbourhood Centres" or IFS) was formally founded at a second international conference at the Cité Universitaire in Paris. Jane Addams and the French Minister of Labor Justin Godart chaired the meeting. *

Today, IFS members represent thousands of local organizations in more than 30 countries, ranging from small self-help groups to large agencies. They are active across the full range of social, economic, cultural, educational and environmental needs in their communities. This great diversity of practical skills is a key strength in tackling the complex problems facing communities and individuals today.

As an international association, IFS supports the work of member organizations by:

- Developing international co-operation projects.
- Organizing conferences, training and exchanges.

*Source: IFS webpage

- Helping to assess member needs and recognizing their achievements. Representing members' interests and concerns through IFS' official consultative status with the United Nations and the Council of Europe, and through collaboration with international networks such as the European Anti-Poverty Network.

Without doubt, the settlement movement and its international association have a unique and abundant history, but its uncertain future lies in our hands. As President of IFS I enjoy a unique perspective on our movement and it is from this vantage point that I want to share with you my thoughts about the settlement movement's future, its international role and responsibility.

Even though we are distinctly branded as a movement focused on local neighborhoods, our future depends on our ability to engage local citizens on issues that are shared internationally. The renowned philosopher George Santayana once wrote: "A man's feet should be planted in his country, but his eyes should survey the world." Clearly we find ourselves in a new era – a global era. Professor Miu Chung Yan gives clear direction to our task in an article titled, *Bridging the Fragmented Community: Revitalizing Settlement Houses in the Global Era*. "In the global era, communities are not collapsed but are diverse, fragmented, and fluid. To strengthen and rejuvenate communities requires a form of community building that can bridge the different interests in the community and provide a platform for members to engage in constant negotiation for strategic solidarity. With its historically proven success in bridging diversities and generating social capital in communities, the settlement house is important to community building in the global era. To revitalize the settlement house is an obligation of the social work profession, a profession that is rooted in the Settlement House Movement and has an emphasis on community building."

While our future is international in scope, there are barriers we must overcome. The first is a kind of parochialism that many of us have about the pre-eminence of our local spheres of operation, and the second revolves around the perception that events outside the local arena have little or no direct impact on the local scene. This “local centrality” belies arrogance as well as a misunderstanding of the impact of international events to change our lives. The fact is we live in a steadily shrinking world owing to the marvels of communications, broadcast technology and advances in travel. Moreover our local situations are increasingly affected, directly, by events in other parts of the world. We get this when it involves economic factors. We know, for example, that local jobs are lost to overseas manufacturing or that the price of gas at our local station rises when OPEC nations act. But in the social arena, the direct connections seem less clear or well known. Perhaps the strongest case for direct local impact socially is the exponential increase in immigration and its impact on local organizations and communities throughout the world. All of us here tonight know of countless examples where immigrants have changed the fabric of our local communities and agencies.

Yet, for the most part, we remain locally centric and nationalistic. Over a hundred years ago, Jane Addams got it right. In an address before the Chicago Liberty Meeting in April 1899, she said, “None of us who has been reared and nurtured in America can be wholly without the democratic instinct...For good or ill we suddenly find ourselves bound to an international situation...The political code, as well as the moral law, has no meaning and becomes absolutely emptied of its contents if we take out of it all relation to the world and concrete cases, and it is exactly in such a time as this that we discover what we really believe...Unless the present situation extends our nationalism into internationalism, unless it has thrust forward our patriotism into humanitarianism we cannot meet it.”

Similarly, the Austrian author, Robert Musil, makes the point when he writes, “Intellectual life is international. Only a period of discouragement, an age that has given up on itself, that wants to ‘preserve,’ that has been driven onto the defensive, can be intellectually nationalist. Such a period is essentially ‘conservative.’ A person who has progress in his heart is international.”

There are three important reasons why local settlement houses need to be involved internationally through IFS. The first reason is to enhance personal and professional growth and development, second is the need for more effective responses to immigrants in our communities, and most importantly the third reason is the opportunity for global impact. Let me expand on each of these reasons.

Enhanced Personal and Professional Growth. Clearly there is a certain excitement and adventure in learning about other peoples, cultures and systems for responding to human need. Such contact and learning increases one’s repertoire of skills and ideas. For many of us, international connection can be a humbling experience that sheds light on our respective nations’ responses to poverty. It is inspiring to see the strengths and quality of the commitment that our colleagues in other countries exhibit when operating under the most difficult circumstances. Getting involved internationally means so much more than simple traveling. Lots of us have experienced other countries and cultures as tourists, but seeing the world through the lens of IFS is so much more qualitative and enriching. One of the things I value most about IFS is its practice of meeting in the “heart of soul” of the world’s cities. It doesn’t conduct business in the usual tourist hotels or attractions. IFS connects with real people doing real things with their nation’s poor, hurting and marginalized groups. IFS challenges you to experience the “grizzle”

of another nation's community, resulting in the most cherished and valuable lessons. Let me share two examples.

During my very first IFS conference in Finland, we had the opportunity to visit two Russian cities. In Vyborg we attended a midnight political rally on the town square when Boris Yeltsin was running for President, the first election since the fall of communism. Being there in the haze of the midnight sun with the Russian people and our IFS colleagues from around the world on an historic occasion is overwhelming to think about even now. The next morning we met with leaders of the Vyborg youth development effort in an enormous, dingy, and gray apartment complex. All of us were inspired as we listened to the problems they confront and the depth of their commitment despite the lack of resources. We then moved on to St. Petersburg where we met with Russians from different walks of life, all were intent on creating neighborhood centers for their parts of the city. One woman in particular stood out. She was in her twenties and the organizer of a movement called "The Children of Chernobyl," which supports the many children and families who lost loved ones or were seriously harmed by that infamous nuclear disaster. She took it upon herself to raise interest and money to help care for the surviving children and their families. She is a remarkable young woman.

At another IFS event in Jerusalem, we saw first hand the unusually strong commitment the Israeli government has for community centers throughout the nation -- a commitment many of us envy. We were particularly impressed with our visit to one of Israel's first Arab/Israeli community centers in Tel Aviv. It was an exciting evening as we listened to Jewish and Arab community workers and residents speak of their common interests and attempts to build community; and it was wonderful having these discussions in a first rate facility.

Truly, involvement in IFS will stimulate your personal and professional growth. IFS brings settlement people together -- people who share many of the same values about human service work, people who understand the realities of community, and people who support each other's commitment and work.

More Effective Responses to immigrants. The impact of immigration on our communities is the second reason for IFS involvement. As cities become increasingly diverse because of the influx of immigrants, the focus of settlement house work will change and demand more from its workers in terms of language and culture. We can serve better by knowing more and connecting better with people's countries of origin. Understanding their language, culture and history leads to higher levels of trust, partnership and ultimately better service. If, as Professor Yan exhorts us, we are to build bridges connecting the diverse elements of our communities in order to achieve strategic solidarity, the need for cross-cultural competence is critical. We simply cannot engage people without appreciating their experience, gaining their trust, and building their confidence for creating better communities.

Opportunities for Global Impact. The last, and for me most compelling, reason for getting involved internationally through IFS is the need to shape world events. With greater involvement and strength, IFS can play a more dominant role in influencing such organizations like the United Nations and the European Union.

On an even grander scale, our involvement could be a counter force that challenges the kind of globalization that is driven by economic interests at the expense of the human connections that should be its foundation. Right now, in the quest for economic viability, we are witnessing the creation of a global economic system that runs the risk of further impoverishing people and nations.

The distinguished researcher and author, Lester Salamon, coined the term “global associational revolution” to represent the popular movements, women’s organizations, environmental organizations and many other kinds of citizen groups that are on the rise in all regions of the world. He and others point to these diverse voluntary associations as the essential building blocks of a “civil society”.

Since the breakdown of state-socialism in the late 1980s, economic, political and social processes have accelerated and minimized the importance of location, distance and borders for economic, political and social issues (Scholte 1999). These processes are collectively referred to as *globalisation*. Global civil society now faces the challenge to actively engage, shape and push the debate about global governance in a more progressive direction that acknowledges the multiple roles performed by civil society organizations as well as the crucial issue of citizen participation in supranational institutions. Without the involvement of settlement houses, neighborhood centers and others, the definition and shape of the appropriate role for civil society in global public life will be left to other principal international actors, specifically intergovernmental institutions and multinational corporations. Civil society organizations derive their legitimacy from their capacities to put new issues on the public agenda, provide information, and act independently from government and business interests and from their closeness to the people on the ground.

Even globalization champions like Thomas Friedman see the pitfalls. In a recent column describing why terrorists hate the United States, Friedman wrote, “. . . globalization is in so many ways Americanization: globalization wears Mickey Mouse ears, it drinks Pepsi and Coke, eats Big Macs, does its computing on an IBM laptop with Windows 98. Many societies around the world can't get enough of it, but others see it as a fundamental threat."

Just listen to this quote from the 1996 annual report of the Coca-Cola company: “A billion hours ago, human life appeared on earth. A billion minutes ago, Christianity emerged. A billion Coca-Colas ago was yesterday morning.”

Friedman knows that simply dismissing -- or demonizing -- globalization as mere Americanization is misleading. Globalization has the ability to alter much more than just the movies or food consumed by a society. And the results can be powerfully positive, devastatingly negative, or (more often) something in between.

This is the point of involvement in IFS. Unless local settlement houses become more active internationally, we will forfeit our role in the quest for a globalization that is more human and in the long run, more effective. Our lack of involvement will ultimately result in our becoming irrelevant in the world’s eyes.

Are you aware of the World Social Forum? At a recent meeting of the Forum in Mumbai, India, a big step forward in the steady rise of a global social movement was taken. Over the past five years, the Forum has grown from a relatively small group of economic dissidents to a huge yet decentralized annual gathering of over 100,000 people. Imagine that!

As I reflect on the prospects of continuing and expanding our international work, I envision a time when we will witness broader and deeper connections between settlement houses worldwide. These connections could lead to significant “settlement summits” that are alternatives to the usual political and economic summits dominated by government and corporate interests and perspectives.

Like the World Social Forum, “Settlement Summits” could help the world focus on the plight of people in neighborhoods and villages, highlighting their challenges and more importantly, the often-heroic efforts being made to bring dignity and hope in desperate situations.

I also envision an expanding network of settlement “dyads” where settlements and neighborhood centers pair up with similar organizations throughout the world, sharing resources, conducting staff exchanges and encouraging and supporting each other’s work.

This is our future. Settlements have a strong history, a clear and completely necessary mission, and a compelling role in shaping the international response to poverty.

As I close, I offer this challenge to you: Albert Einstein once said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the whole world.” Let’s take a moment to imagine, to think bigger and more broadly. Why don’t we, tonight, commit to pursuing the vision of a worldwide rejuvenation of the settlement house movement and let’s make it happen. It may seem grandiose or unimaginable, but it is possible. We can start by increasing our involvement in IFS so that it becomes more influential and has greater capacity. Next, we can identify and engage international partners so that we obtain the necessary knowledge, strength, and connections. Finally we can plan, save, and raise money so that the “International Settlement Movement” is strong and real. We certainly can overcome the barriers of travel, time zones, cultures and borders to create a more civilized world. This is a vision worthy of our attention and investment. We cannot allow our parochialism, our arrogance, or our isolation to prevent us from leveraging the social capital so available, so well known to us and so clear in its importance for humanizing our planet.

If we want to make an impact on the overwhelming problems we all face -- poverty, drug and alcohol addiction, crime, violence, breakdown of families, illiteracy -- we must work together as a “world nation”. True world peace and collaboration will happen, not from the top down, but from the bottom up as we meet one another as brothers and sisters.

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