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CHALLENGES TO SOCIAL WORK: EUROPE

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I would like to start my comments on this issue of international social work with an anecdote which dates back to the years when I was President of the European Association of Schools of Social Work, which is a regional association of the International Association of Schools of Social Work. I visited our international secretariat in Vienna which at that time was led by a social worker from India. When I visited her, she introduced me to her neighbors as the President of Europe, which is actually short for the President of the European regional group. But little did she or her neighbors know how heterogeneous a continent Europe actually is. As a matter of fact and by contrast, for instance, to the United States, Europe is not a federal union of states governed by a single government.

Europe is, politically speaking as well as economically and socially speaking, a very heterogeneous, political entity. In spite of the recent name change of the European community to the European union, only 12 countries belong to this union; most remain outside. My own country, Switzerland, is not a member of the European union. There is even more heterogeneity after the breakdown of communism and the developments which have occurred since 1989. This heterogeneity of the European continent and the European political arena is also reflected in the European social work scene. There is no such thing as a European social work education council, like for instance in this country. There are many different understandings, definitions, and other aspects of the profession within

Europe. In Germany, for instance -- because we have German colleagues and German students with us here -- there is a distinction between the profession of social work and the profession of social pedagogy. Some see it as two different entities and some, as different aspects of one professional paradigm.

In other countries we have probation workers or youth workers or community developers, professionals who are not seen as part of the social work profession. And when, during the 1980's, comparative studies were perfected by agencies in Brussels or other institutions, it was difficult to count the number of schools of social work within Europe because there was not one single definition of the profession. It was therefore not possible to define how many schools or institutions were preparing students for the social work profession for their work in their heterogeneous European continent.

It was not possible to find a common denominator of social work education - to find a common denominator of its contents or of entry requirements to schools or of standards of qualification. However, despite this heterogeneity and this process of diversification typical in Europe, we also now have a countervailing factor - a process of integration, if not homogenization, of European social work education. I think there are two important steps that should be mentioned in this context. One is the adoption of the so-called European social charter in 1967 by the Council of Europe.

Europe has had a very interesting development of the idea of human and social rights. It is the only continent which in addition to the Declaration of International Human Rights, which came out of the United Nations, also has a regional charter of human rights, and even a regional charter of social rights. In the corresponding countries and overseeing bodies for this kind of human and social rights, and in the context of the adoption of a charter of social rights, the Council of Europe thought that it made sense to define a common standard for the profession which probably in this context has a far reaching role to play. And at that time the Council of Europe developed a very interesting definition of the social work profession which constitutes a first step toward a common denominator and a common understanding of the profession. And this is the definition. "Social work is a specific professional activity which aims at fostering effective mutual adaptation of individuals, families, groups and the social environment in which they live, and developing self-respect and self-responsibility of the individuals, utilizing the capacities of persons, inter-personal relationships, group work and resources provided by the community." I think this is still a very modern and very interesting definition of our profession.

The second important step toward more of a common standard, toward more homogeneity, has been made by the European community through the adoption of a general system of the recognition of higher education diplomas. As you may know, the European community has tried to achieve ease of mobility throughout Europe. In the first instance this meant mobility of merchandise and mobility of capital, but since 1989, increasingly it has meant mobility of people. And this means also mobility of professionals, especially service

professionals and human service professionals. In this context the establishment and adaptation of a general system of mutual recognition of diplomas became very important. And this constitutes a second important step towards more homogeneity and common understanding of our profession within Europe. And under the pressure of these European international bodies, such as the Council of Europe and the European Community, social work educators were forced to strengthen the academic pace of social work education, and especially, the scientific foundation of social work education. I think this is a very important development within European social work education because it makes us more of a force in international social work and in international social development.

Now that we have begun to develop a common European denominator, European social work, in my opinion, could contribute more to international social work development and to international development at large, especially in the context of this very modern definition of our profession, a profession which tries to develop self-respect and self-responsibility of individuals by utilizing the capacities not only of persons but also of inter-personal relationships and resources provided by the community. Such a profession should have an important role to play in the context of social development.

And I think the perspective of the European social charter is an interesting perspective for an international dialogue, and especially an interesting perspective for the United States, our host country today. I see the main difference between United States' social development and European social development as a difference between what in this country should be called the commodification of welfare, and what in

Europe is increasingly called de-commodification of welfare. In this country, especially under its liberal market-oriented model, welfare is still seen as a commodity, as a merchandise bought by those people in the market who have the necessary purchasing power. Behind me it says that this university stands for the access to excellence and I think it is true, but we all know that the students studying at this university have to pay a relatively high tuition and people who want to have access to the health care market, for example, are also obligated to pay for access to this kind of commodity. And in this respect, in this country, welfare is still a commodity and welfare is commodified.

The European idea of social rights -- of extending social rights to people through their membership, not only in the state but within communities, territorial communities, the functional communities, associations, sickness funds, and so on-- I think this idea of extending membership in communities and, through this membership, social rights, constitutes a de-commodification of welfare and in this respect, a very interesting perspective for an international dialogue.

In concluding I would like to thank Lynne Healy, and all the other members of this wonderful school for the idea that they have had in establishing this center. It is my belief that given the global-local context of social work and of social development at large, we have to have institutions such as the present one in order to discuss issues the way we have discussed them today on this panel.