

# **Berlin IFS Conference Speech 2016 by Michael Zisser**

**September 28, 2016**

In a few days, I will finish my role as President of the International Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers, having served for the past six years. My involvement on the Board or as a member extends over 20 years, and I hope to continue that engagement on the Board in the seat reserved for the past-president. Consistent with my reputation both with IFS and in my position at University Settlement and The Door for saying what I believe needs to be said, I will use this opportunity to discuss three controversial issues confronting us now and which will be even more important in the future for the work of IFS. I will present each as a conflict between opposing views of the world, of our place in the world, since we seem to be living in a time when polarization is rampant and unavoidable. Standing here thousands of miles from home, I hope this speech will help me perhaps mitigate the effects of a mental health disorder I am now experiencing, known in United States as the “Trump Disease.” Every day, I live in fear of what will be my country’s future if the wrong person is elected President.

The three issues I will briefly address are:

- (1) Truth versus lies in the public arena;
- (2) A commitment to sharing what we know among friends versus our tendencies to be isolated;
- (3) The future of IFS as an advocacy network versus having an over-emphasis on operating programs.

## **Truth versus Lies in the Public Arena**

If the presidential campaign in the United States is proving anything, it’s that there is no longer any such thing as evident or accepted truth. Outright lies are becoming commonplace in our public discourse, accepted as truth or just accepted as free speech. Lies are not challenged, either by the public or the press or any other parties. Reinforcement of lies by repeatedly telling more lies has become a successful marketing strategy, based on the premise that sooner or later the truth will be completely obscured. There are no consequences to lying, as if it makes no difference. I’m not talking about issues which may be subject to interpretation, or about an acknowledgement of varying perspectives or interpretations on complex issues, but about lies easily documented and fact-checked. How does this happen? How has this become acceptable in the political arena and in our communities?

We know that people only hear what they want to hear, only read what they want to read, only socialize or talk with people like themselves, so lies aren’t lies and sound

perfectly fine to them, consistently in line with their beliefs and feelings and knowledge. People, including the press, won't challenge false statements even when they know better. And I am not referring here to countries with limited freedom of speech or lacking a free press. Lies, outlandish statements, apparently make for better tweets or headlines or news bites. The indifference to truth exhibited by the public is frightening. Or would it be completely politically incorrect to say that too many people are just closed and blind to reasonable, transparent discourse and unconcerned about their ignorance and willing to believe or want to believe anything. To be clear, my references here may be about the United States, but from what I read and hear, the same diagnosis can be made for almost every country represented in this room.

From a management perspective, as I teach my social work students, I do say that every leader lies at certain moments, mostly little lies to make organizational life easier. Sometimes effective strategies require us to shade the truth a bit. Family members also sometimes lie, especially to those they love because the truth can be hurtful and unproductive. But political lies are dangerous, because there is no way of knowing when the lies end and reality steps in, or when the basic concept of trust is so seriously undermined that it is unrepairable, or when the consequences can be very damaging and perhaps irreparable on a larger scale.

And my response to this issue? Don't lie too much, and certainly no big lies. Don't support those who lie. Call out, publically and loudly, those who are lying, even when they are possibly your allies or your funders. In America, we have the phrase, "speaking truth to power." The only way to return to some level of trust and truthfulness in public discourse is to be unrelenting in its defense. We also represent a VERY large number of people in our communities. Directly, and perhaps sometimes indirectly, we must convey to them in appropriate ways what they need to know to be effective members of our communities. This position will require us to open our minds a bit, to understand the arguments and opinions even of those with whom we disagree. We are not free from politics. We are, if we remain true to our historic traditions, POLITICAL at our very core!

### **Sharing versus Isolation**

I'm from New York City. Obviously, we believe that no one knows anything more or better than we do so why we would think there was anything to learn by coming out of our parochial shell. Wait, that's a lie. In fact, many of us do share what we know, we do learn from others, we do encourage our staff to work with others ... and as many of you know, we host dozens of visits a year either at University Settlement or The Door or other settlement houses where we both teach and learn from an amazing number of visitors. At this conference, we even decided it was important to send 10 staff to participate, knowing how valuable this experience will be to our future.

Generally speaking, however, not enough sharing goes on. The Euro-group seems to be addressing this issue very directly, with numerous exchanges at all levels of the organizations and across age groups – e.g. the youth group here at the

conference. But much of this is small scale and limited to the countries which have the financial resources to participate, and I don't believe we have actually measured the impact of these exchanges or sharing. More importantly, in America little of this occurs. I can't think of a single visit to New York from a settlement from another state, nor have we sent folks elsewhere in America if we discount the occasional conferences. Sometimes, going from one part of New York City to another is a major endeavor. Exchanges or sharing across North and South America are minimal to non-existent, and within each part of the hemisphere are also minimal. I may be exaggerating a bit to make my point, but I don't think so.

Technology enables us to do a lot of sharing, or pretend to be sharing through the internet. We have access to far more information than we could ever assimilate, far more research is available than we can organize for effective use, far more documentation of best practices is just a click away. But let's be honest. Who does this kind of sharing or searching? How much time is really spent by our staff on this exercise? Who actually reads further than the executive summaries of any source material? Who has the time or attention span to be a continuous learner? There is absolutely NO substitute for person-to-person interactions irrespective of the ubiquitous nature of media. Sharing is hard, isolation is easy. Just doing your job is what you're paid for, not stepping back and doing some reading or critical thinking. Sharing funding is challenging. Isolation requires no special funding.

Again, what are we to do? Here, the answer is obvious and well within our control. Be open to more sharing. Dedicate even scarce staff resources to this function. Be less defensive in what you think you know. Be less introspective and more open to personal risk taking. Make sure that you and your organization, from top to bottom, has the time and space to see the larger context in which you work. Reward staff for "growing" in their interests and expertise and not just doing their job well.

This conference is the perfect example of what we must do, reinforcing our global community and sharing common interests and actions.

### **Advocacy versus Program Delivery**

The Settlement House movement, from its origins in London to its spread across Europe and the Americas and other parts of the globe, was rooted not just in the provision of much needed programs to disadvantaged individuals and families, but equally important to advocacy for important social and economic issues. The settlements were at the heart of the Progressive era of the late 19<sup>th</sup> early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the relationship between government and its community obligations was being reshaped. I would argue here, as strongly as I am able, that *we must return to those roots*. We must refocus our energies towards advocacy and education around fundamentally important universal issues, and NOT be satisfied that we are just conducting quality programs.

What are some of these issues, to be clear? Economic justice. Access for all to work and mobility opportunities. Appreciation for the strengths which new populations,

immigrants, bring to the growth and stability of our communities. Equal protections under the law. Elimination of prejudices. Access to housing and healthy environment. And so on.

Why is this so easy to say and difficult to implement? There is little or no money to pay for this function in any of our organizations. We are too dependent on government funding and control, in some cases representing most or all of our income, when it is the government which would often be the focus of our advocacy. We may not be willing to take risks and get out of our general comfort level. We may lack the expertise needed in organizing and teaching. We may be creating enemies where now we have few and be uncomfortable when others are angry with us for what we say or do. We may even, possibly, be on the losing side of many fights and arguments. We are, way too often, passive or silent in our response to what is happening in the world.

We have many small victories, fewer big victories. This wonderfully planned conference will display quite clearly the essential and wonderful humanitarian work we do. But what will also become clear is that NOT A SINGLE country in the world is leaning politically in the right direction, either on the issue of immigration or other concerns of major importance to us. Here in Germany, Chancellor Merkel is criticized for her remarkable courageous efforts on the immigration issue, and then loses politically in her home State and here in Berlin in recent elections. Governments are drifting to the right, or creating impossible tests for becoming a citizen, or cutting off immigration, or isolating newcomers in communities not capable of providing sufficient services, or cutting back on key parts of the social welfare state, or voting to restore economic boundaries between countries. In America, a country born on the premise of immigration, we have a presidential candidate who may very well win who has made his platform based on exclusion and prejudice and fear and every phobia one can imagine, what we call nativism. Even the UN is appearing especially weak in trying to resolve any number of international conflicts. We can blame leaders for this, or we can wonder why people VOTE for these representatives.

We are losing the battle of social influence even if we do excellent work. We don't have the necessary media appeal or capacity. We don't have political action committees. We have not won the minds and hearts of the people. We provide the legitimation of doing good but too often only on the margins. We do not have the POWER. Governments and others can say we are doing great things, and then turn around and enact policies opposed to our core values and principles.

So what am I suggesting? That we immediately become more constructively aggressive about the causes we believe in, just as Jane Addams did 125 years ago and over her entire career. Running Hull House was the least of her accomplishments. She was a world advocate for peace and justice and equality. Where is she today? Where are the new Jane Addams?

My recommendations are as follows:

(1) We must deliberately and forcefully declare that the purpose of settlements and neighborhood centers is to advocate for causes which benefit our communities and our constituents as much as it is to conduct quality programs.

(2) We must challenge our neighbors and our elected officials to pursue a social justice agenda.

(3) We need to educate people that there is little or nothing to fear by addressing the key challenges of our time.

Remember that our movement has a purpose and mission just as important today as in 1884 when Toynbee Hall was founded in the East End of London.

### Conclusion

Some of you may think that I am being overly pessimistic in this talk, or perhaps unfair regarding the excellent work that we all do, or that I am offering only criticisms and not solutions. That is NOT my intent. Quite the opposite. You should not be pessimistic, or worried, or sad, or feel helpless or hopeless.

Instead, feel constructively ANGRY, feel empowered, feel energized by your friends and what you will hear and learn at this conference. The solutions are in this room, not for just a couple days, but when you return home. Berlin is the perfect place for us to claim our rightful and expected place in the fight for justice and equality across the globe. Being actively engaged with IFS is the perfect forum to have your voices heard.

For the past two weeks, the United Nations has been holding its annual meeting, with almost 200 countries being represented. For the first time ever, the UN has just adopted a Declaration on Migrants and Refugees, responding to the sad fact that there are now over 65 million refugees around the globe, an increase of 5 million over last year. This document, approved by the very diverse membership not generally inclined to agree on anything, will be known as the New York Declaration.

Before we close this conference in a few days, we should agree that we need to produce and support an IFS Declaration which will reflect the work of our international movement.

Thank you everyone. This is an important time for us to be together.

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