

“Using our Knowledge” – Information and Social Welfare Policy and Planning: The Uses of Grey Documentation

International Expert Meeting

Jerusalem, Israel

24-26 November 1992

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The European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research gratefully acknowledges the support provided for the organization of the conference as well as the publication of this report by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the State of Israel.

Preface

This report presents results from a meeting held in Jerusalem in November 1992 which set out to discuss the significance of grey literature (or better, grey information as it turned out during the meeting) in social practices. Many kinds of information are relevant in social welfare policy and practice, and they are often sources of unique knowledge.

The application of available knowledge in social welfare is dependent on defining a knowledge base. Social welfare organizations and their knowledge bases contain a broad selection of information: from empirical research in scholarly journals to the practical wisdom of the practitioner. These varied sources of information do not necessarily make us ask ourselves what information is available, but make us pose the questions: Who has the information? Where is the information located? And how is the information disseminated? It is in this context that an expert meeting was held on the topic of "Information and Social Welfare Policy and Planning: The Uses of Grey Documentation".

Grey documentation proliferates within social welfare organizations and presents a manifestation of information which exists, but is not necessarily contextually defined. This amorphous style of information raises the issue of methods of information sharing. The sharing of information between social welfare organizations is defined as a goal of the profession to facilitate the success of the work of those organizations. Grey documentation serves as a useful example for other types of information in the social welfare profession which establish similar characteristics. This type of information includes, for example, the practical wisdom of the practitioner, community newspapers and computerized bulletin boards.

The presentations at the meeting comprised material on national information systems and information networks, the exchange of community information, practitioner-client communication and service organization evaluation studies. For the effective development of a framework of this type of information, the crucial issue must be tackled as to how this valuable knowledge can be disseminated to facilitate its utilization throughout the social welfare profession. In the European context: social, linguistic and organizational barriers to information exchange were found to be prevalent.

As such, the meeting fits the goal of the Information Centre of the European Centre in the context of which it was organized. The major programme goals of the European Centre Information Centre, which started in 1990, were to break down the barriers to the use and exchange of information. Four strategies have been developed to achieve this aim: *firstly*, to archive and make data produced within the framework of the European Centre activities accessible (e.g. a database on non-profit organizations); *secondly*, to enhance the exchange of information between countries and different sectors in the field of health and welfare (the main activity being here INFUSE, and ESWIN for the future); the *third* strategy is to elucidate the information – which is called the visualization of social data – as information is quite useless when it is not visualized in a clear and intelligible way; *fourthly*, the role of the European Centre Information Centre is not only to collect and disseminate information, but also to analyse the role and use of different types of information in social welfare and practice. The meeting falls essentially into this final strategy.

The meeting was a success, not only in that the significance of grey literature could be verified by many examples presented, but also by the fact that it dismissed the commonly held belief that literature is grey, i.e. not published, because it lacks quality. The meeting, moreover, formulated recommendations by all experts from 10 countries which explicitly emphasized their concern over the under-exploitation of both grey literature as well as information in social practices and social policy.

The recommendations (which you can find on page 63) consequently expressed the need for information intermediaries in this area. As an answer to this need, and as another result of the meeting, a working group in the expert meeting had the idea of setting up such an international intermediary network. Up until now, this intermediary – which is called ESWIN (an acronym for “European Social Welfare Information Network”) – has accomplished to set out its goals in a background document, founded a secretariat (thanks to the generosity of NIZW, the Netherlands Institute of Care and Welfare in Utrecht) and is in the process of planning its inaugural meeting in London (thanks to an initiative by the Community Development Foundation and the National Institute for Social Work). All this proves that an expert meeting should not necessarily only result in the exchange of information between a few experts, but can also result in recommendations which can then lead to action, which we hope will be of use to all European social practice and policy communities.

Our thanks for making the meeting possible go to the Israeli Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs for hosting and co-sponsoring the meeting and the report. Particular thanks go to Mr Avraham Lavine, Director, and to Ms Haya Daskal, Deputy Director of the Department of International Relations for their assistance and effective support in helping prepare and organize the meeting, not to mention their pleasant hospitality. Our appreciation also goes to Mr Marvin Ishai for having acted daily, as a precise and competent rapporteur, and for having written this final report.

We would also like to thank all the participants at the meeting for their active input and participation and for having come up with concrete recommendations in such a pleasant atmosphere. Special thanks must also go to Kevin Harris (Community Development Foundation) who presented an excellent keynote speech to the meeting which helped to – right from the start – give a consistent thematic direction during the other days of the meeting. His keynote speech is included as a separate contribution to this report. Also special thanks to those institutions who were among the initiators in the Jerusalem meeting of a follow-up activity, i.e. ESWIN (National Institute for Social Work, UK; Community Development Foundation, UK; National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health, Finland; Netherlands Institute of Care and Welfare; as well as ourselves at the Israeli Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, State of Israel and the European Centre, Austria.). We sincerely hope that ESWIN will develop as a network for the effective exchange of information in the field of social welfare throughout Europe.

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