

23 Social work across four continents

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Social work was not my first choice of career. I grew up in Kent, the 'Garden of England', and worked on a farm every Saturday for a friend's father. It was not surprising that when I left school at 16, I enrolled at an agricultural college, determined to become a farmer myself. It was not to be. I soon learned that because I didn't come from a farming family, the best I could hope to achieve would be to be a farm manager of a large commercial farm – the very last thing I wanted. My dream in tatters, I got a job as a stockbroker's clerk in London, commuting each day and hating every second of every day. Life at home was difficult too. I was an only child and my father was bipolar. He had spent periods of my childhood in and out of psychiatric hospitals while my mother struggled to keep the family together, working in commercial banking and looking after my father. During one particularly unhappy episode my mother became ill herself, and I was cared for by the parents of schoolfriends and my mother's relatives. By the time I left school, I lived for my free time, which was spent completing the community element of a Gold Duke of Edinburgh Award.¹ Looking back, I see this and my father's illness as the triggers that led me into a career in social work. I began an introductory course in social care at a local college, and on completion of my studies, applied for jobs all over the UK. My first job was in a

residential childcare unit for emotionally disturbed 10- to 16-year-olds in Aberdeen in the North East of Scotland at the age of 19, not understanding a word anyone said to me!²

I had a great time in Aberdeen; I made lifelong friends and still see the 'Granite City' (Aberdeen) as my 'home'. But it was far from easy at the beginning. Scottish Nationalism was very strong at this time and I was often called a 'white settler' or even a 'Sooth mooter' (literally, a person with a southern way of speaking) by the families with whom I was working. The aim of the residential unit was to help children and young people to return home to their families, schools and communities, but it soon became apparent to me that my job was much more than the job description led me to believe. This has been a theme throughout my working career. I also became involved in the Boys' Brigade, a Christian youth organisation which was first set up with deprived youngsters in Glasgow in 1883.³ A year into the job, I went on to take a two-year social work qualification at a local college of education, through an employment-based learning route. I then applied and was accepted for Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO),⁴ taking two years' unpaid leave from my job. This was the beginning of over fifteen years of social work overseas.

A baptism of fire: working in Belize, Central America

My first assignment was in Belize, in Central America, as a Social Work Adviser. (Belize was formerly a British colony known as British Honduras. It became independent of Britain in 1981.) My work here was superficially similar to that in Aberdeen: I was based at a juvenile detention centre, where I lived and worked on site. But here the similarities ended. The centre was far from the nearest town, with intermittent water and electricity and a two-mile walk to the nearest highway. Many of the young people detained there had committed crimes such as armed robbery, burglary, theft and assault; others were locked up because their behaviour was deemed uncontrollable. In my first six months there, my house was burgled on many occasions. It transpired that my burglar was a young man who was the scapegoat of other youths. He stole money, clothes and personal possessions in order to distribute them to his peers. In exasperation, I had a brainwave and made the young man my watchman. Whenever I was away, he would sit on the porch and make sure that no one entered the house. I was never burgled again. This account demonstrates that social work is about building trust and building relationships. It is also about empowerment, about giving others a purpose and sense of responsibility (see Adams 2003).

Conditions in the centre were basic, and in many ways it was out of sight of the community and society as whole. Perhaps because of this, it was run on lines which would have been familiar in British Victorian times. Lashing with a rope was a common method of chastisement. I remember vividly the first time I saw a young lad of 13 years old being lashed for disrespecting an officer; yet from what I had seen the officer had been extremely disrespectful to the young man. On another occasion, I decided to intervene in an altercation between a 16-year-old and an officer. The youth was being punched and kicked by the officer, and I stood in between the two and shouted for the attack to stop. I too received

a few blows until my voice could be heard around the campus shouting for the officer to leave. This young man was known as 'top dog' to his peers. He was a notorious gang member who had often threatened me in the past, verbally and physically, and on one occasion had taken a machete to my head for challenging his bullying of others. After I stepped in to protect him, he sank into my arms, crying like a baby, and asked if I would help him. This was the start of our work together. He said he wanted to change his life, so we began to look at each aspect of his life, beginning with education. He enrolled again in school and got involved in sport, something for which he had a natural ability. I didn't expect him to withdraw from the gang – after all, it had provided him with the attachment he had craved in his childhood after he had been abandoned by his parents (see Howe 1995). But I hoped that by becoming part of another network, he would come to feel included in his wider community. Sadly, on a visit to Belize this year, I was told that he had been killed in a gang-related attack.

Life at the detention centre was made all the more bearable for me by the strong friendship I built with the centre's Director, who went on later to become a lecturer in social work at the University of Belize. He also lived on site with his young family, and I spent many happy weekends at his family home discussing social work, as this was something new for him, and we began to discuss how we could make changes in the centre and introduce new opportunities for training and development for the detainees. After a year, thanks to our efforts, lashing was discontinued and every young person was delighted. But the changes were not welcomed by all staff members, who felt that their control and power had been taken away. Six months later, a new, forward-thinking government permanent secretary⁵ responsible for children and young people asked what should be done about the centre. The centre's Director and I recommended that it should be closed; we felt that staff members were simply too entrenched in their attitudes and we saw no way of changing this situation. The permanent secretary respected our views, and the centre was subsequently closed. The young people were relocated to a new centre fifty miles away in Belize City, where most of them had come from before their detention. The centre Director was appointed Director of the new institution, and I, again, became its Social Work Adviser. We began to put in place the systems which we knew would make a difference in the young people's lives, and before I knew it, my two years were up and I was back in Aberdeen. (I am pleased to report that over the past ten years, the whole legislation pertaining to children and young people has been overhauled in Belize.)

I was glad to see my friends in Aberdeen again; I had not been able to afford to return at all during my placement owing to the prohibitive cost of travel. But it was not easy going back to being a residential social worker again after my time spent on high-level government committees and influencing policy. I returned to Belize for two short trips in 1997 and 1999, when I delivered training on a variety of social work topics to the departments of Women's Affairs, Youth Affairs and Refugees. It was an exciting time in Belize. Social work was a new area of practice and some US-trained social workers were returning home to work. A Faculty of Social Work was being established for the first time at the university.

A new assignment: Kosovo

Before long I was on the move again, this time to Kosovo in South-Eastern Europe, as Country Director for Social Work for an international NGO, EveryChild.⁶ I arrived just after the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia at the end of 1999, with Kosovo on the brink of collapse, utilities and banks closed down, and an interim government created by the international community.

Much of my work in the early months was to allow people to verbalise what they had endured and gradually to support the rebuilding of their lives. I was responsible for the delivery of a range of programmes and also had to satisfy donors that their funds were being used appropriately to help those in most need. I had to juggle the needs of my own staff members too; they had all suffered greatly and were supporting their own extended families. Kosovo remains one of the least developed areas of Europe today. Although undergoing major social, economic and political transformation, the disintegration of old systems has not yet been replaced by viable new ones. For example, around 50 per cent of adults are currently unemployed, with all the damaging consequences this brings for individuals, families and communities (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2010).

I was responsible for the work of eight national staff in Kosovo. Together we introduced the Newpin model⁷ into family support programmes. Much of my supervision with staff was spent in allowing them time to cry and reflect, but also to share as a group. I like to see this as the building of a community where no money exchanges hands or deals are done, but instead there is open communication and honesty is applauded and appreciated and not condemned, with permission given to move on when appropriate. I stayed for a year only, finding myself emotionally drained by the situation and not wanting to become like so many of those in the emergency international field who survived on little more than strong coffee and chocolate. I was frustrated that I was expected to chase funding, write proposals and do *to* rather than work *with* people – a recurring theme of my experiences to date. I felt that my social work values were being fundamentally compromised and I had to do something to recover my sense of what a social worker could and should be.

And then: Kyrgyzstan

Another continent and another risk took me to Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia, at the time leading up to the events of 11 September (2001). In many ways, I felt like one of the children I was going to help; I was a child on the move! But, unlike them, I had been able to make choices.

Kyrgyzstan had become an independent state with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In the ten years which followed, political and ethnic conflict had been fuelled by poverty and corruption, and hundreds of children and young people had taken to the streets as never before. The state's solution had been to institutionalise these children; my task (still working for EveryChild) was to act as Social

Work Adviser, developing social work practice at the state's Street Children's Centre. This was hugely challenging for me. I believed that what the children and young people needed was not an institution but a temporary shelter and services on the street, such as health, food and education. They needed to learn to trust adults again, and I felt that whisking them away to somewhere unfamiliar was not helpful to them. I, like them, had been thrust into a culture I did not know, living under rules that seemed complex and that were made to control me and not protect me. For the first time I was missing home, and this reminds me of one young person who came to the centre. He was an 8-year-old who arrived late one cold night escorted by the police, wearing just a pair of ragged old knee-length shorts and a grubby yellow T-shirt. He was slight in stature, had a mass of black curly hair, and cuts to his face and arms on his black skin. (This was an ex-Soviet state where 85 per cent of the population has blond hair, blue eyes and white skin.) The boy looked as out of place as I felt. How had he come here and how was he going to be understood? For weeks, we were not able to say anything to each other because neither could understand what the other said. We were both living in a world we could not understand. I was taken back to my early years as a very 'green' social worker when I was thrust into a world where chaos in the families I was working alongside was the norm. How was I going to begin to understand these families? I believe that the word 'understanding' is overused in social work and has lost its true meaning. No two situations are ever exactly the same; we can never fully understand what another person is going through. I rarely use the term now and prefer to say, 'I hear what you are saying and acknowledge you want this to change, let's talk how we are going to do that.' My work with the boy began by observing and giving my feedback to see if my analysis was right. We did this with pictures at first. I would hold up or draw a picture and point at it and at him and he would either nod or shake his head; then, as time went on, he gained confidence and either drew or scrambled to find another picture to evidence what he wanted to say. Only then could I begin to fit all the pieces of the jigsaw together. As social workers, we are good at fitting all the pieces of the jigsaw together and offer this skill to the world when looking at developing and supporting change.

Returning home

I stayed in Kyrgyzstan for fifteen months before returning to the UK in 2002 to cover a maternity leave post in Norfolk at a children's hospice. My parents were living nearby, and although this was emotionally demanding work (I was a family support practitioner, supporting families pre- and post-bereavement), I knew that I needed time to recover and rebuild my strength. Kosovo had been an extremely stressful place to live and work in and then I had gone straight to Kyrgyzstan. I had seen many of my colleagues in the international social work scene living on a knife edge between sanity and insanity, and I didn't want to end up like that.

I had always wanted to go back to Aberdeen, so when a job as a social worker with a fostering and adoption team came up I applied and got it. I was responsible for two years for the recruitment and training of foster carers in North Aberdeenshire, and then went on to become the Employee

Development Officer for Social Work/Social Care in Aberdeenshire. My work covered a large geographical area and 5,500 staff. I stayed for four years, returning to Kyrgyzstan once each year under the auspices of UNICEF to deliver training for residential childcare staff, evaluate and provide training for street children's projects and advise the government on foster care standards (this was at a time when foster care was being introduced for the first time).

In 2008, I moved to East Lothian to become a social work training officer for Children's Services and, significantly, a volunteer with Waverley Care⁸ in Edinburgh, sitting on its Advisory Board and acting as a 'buddy'/befriender. Because of my previous work, the agency's Director invited me to contribute to a Scottish government-funded project for HIV education providers in Malawi, targeted at those working with disaffected youth in rural communities, commercial sex workers, men who have sex with men, and prisoners. I went out to Malawi in May 2010 with another worker from Waverley Care and, since then, have gone on to give advice on the implementation of the education and training programme. I also joined the British Association of Social Worker's International Committee at the same time, and have since attended meetings regularly across the UK as well as the 2010 World Conference in Hong Kong.

And finally: the Balkans

I have now taken another two-year career break to become the Regional Child Protection Adviser for another children's charity, this time Terre des Hommes (TDH)⁹ in the Balkans.

MY TYPICAL WEEK

My typical week is spent in each of the delegation countries where TDH has a presence. I leave home in Bucharest on a flight every Sunday afternoon ready to begin work first thing on Monday morning and return back home on a Friday evening. A typical week would be spent working with TDH staff responsible for the capacity-building of the child protection networks. This might include following up from training I have delivered to them and they have delivered across the centres of social work they are supporting and advising. We will discuss developments since my last visit. There are also complex case discussions to be held, and I must attend UN meetings on social welfare development where there is a heavy UN presence. In one month, I am likely to be in four different countries, hearing several different languages and supporting and advising complex cases where there are few resources, but the need is the same. This takes me back to the early days in social work in the UK when we had little to offer but ourselves.

How do I survive such a strenuous schedule? Well, apart from my addiction to chocolate, thank goodness for the invention of modern technology, which means that no matter where I am,

I can chat to family and friends with the push of a button and now see them as we gossip about what is happening back home and in the lives of our friends. To help clear my mind and allow me some 'head space', I try to swim every day if possible – those Soviets certainly knew the importance of building open-air pools in the heart of cities for citizens to enjoy and help keep them healthy. Otherwise, I wander through the Bucharest parks at the weekend and sit with a pot of tea, reading every word in my *Guardian Weekly*. I am still very new here, but I very much look forward to making friends with some local people so that I can enjoy lively discussions around the dinner-table and go and see a trashy Hollywood movie to escape into. I guess I am quite a resilient person and always have been, until someone sweeps me off my feet and I settle for a life in the Highlands of Scotland with a log fire, my CD collection of music from around the world, and a wonderful man to cook for me.

Looking ahead

So what can we hope for our profession? 'Social work' and 'social worker': does our title match what we do? If so, how, and if not, why not? Sadly, I believe that for many of us in the UK, being a social worker has become being an administrator. Yet our contribution can be enormous. When I embarked on a career in social work, I knew that I was entering a world that was going to view what I do as interfering; that I was likely to be seen as a 'do-gooder' and a waste of taxpayers' money. But I also knew that I would be entering a profession which had the needs and rights of the world's citizens as its foundation and could help people realise their full potential. I have not been proved wrong on either point, and I can say without a shadow of doubt that even at the most stressful and difficult times in my life, I would not wish to have done anything different. I believe that as a profession, social work can achieve more than any other without spending a penny, because we offer support and guidance and create a space for people to achieve their own goals in their own way. For me, it is very simple, whether working overseas or at home in the UK: 'If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.'¹⁰

Notes

- 1 The Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme is a UK charity which aims to give 14- to 24-year-olds the chance to develop skills for work and life, fulfil their potential and have a brighter future. See <http://www.dofe.org/>.
- 2 The regional variation of 'the Doric' which is spoken in the North East of Scotland, especially around Aberdeen City and the County of Aberdeenshire, is quite different to English not just in the words that it uses, but also in the way that English words are spoken. See <http://www.scotslanguage.com/>.

- 3 There are companies of the Boys' Brigade throughout the world. See <http://www.boys-brigade.org.uk/>.
- 4 VSO is the world's largest independent international development organisation that works through volunteers to fight poverty in developing countries. See <http://www.vso.org.uk/>.
- 5 The government minister has since gone on to become UNICEF's Deputy Representative in Eritrea.
- 6 EveryChild is an international development charity which aims to stop children growing up vulnerable and alone. See <http://www.everychild.org.uk/>.
- 7 Newpin is a service which began in England, targeting families with identified needs who were seen as ready to be actively involved in making changes for themselves and their children. See, for example, Family Action Southwark Newpin, <http://www.family-action.org.uk/uploads/documents/Southwark%20Newpin%20%28referrers%29.pdf>.
- 8 Waverley Care is Scotland's leading charity providing care and support to people living with HIV and Hepatitis C, and to their partners, families and carers. Education and training form an important aspect of its work. See <http://www.waverleycare.org/>.
- 9 The Terre des Hommes International Federation is a network of eleven international organisations working for the rights of children and to promote equitable development without racial, religious, political, cultural or gender-based discrimination. See <http://www.terredeshommes.org/>.
- 10 This is a motto for many activist groups in Australia and elsewhere, originally credited to the Aboriginal Activists' Group, Queensland, in the 1970s.

References

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