

50 years of the International Social Security Association

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Origins

On 18 July 1927 the heads of a number of mutual benefit societies and social insurance funds from nine countries addressed the following message to their colleagues all over Europe:

The undersigned . . . consider that the time is opportune for the constitution of an international organisation of national unions of sickness funds or of mutual benefit societies, which will have as its end the co-ordination of national efforts for the development and improvement of social insurance and in particular of sickness insurance, by the regular exchange of information and by periodical meetings of delegates of mutual benefit societies or sickness funds.²

This proposal certainly touched a chord, because in October of the same year a meeting was held in Brussels at which delegates from 17 organisations, representing 20 million insured persons in nine countries, set up the International Conference of National Associations of Mutual Benefit Societies and of Sickness Insurance Funds. By the following year there were 29 member institutions representing 30 million insured persons in 18 countries.

However, it very soon became apparent, in the light of the rapid development of social insurance legislation and the broad range of activities being undertaken in this field by the International Labour Organisation, that the original aim of the Conference, which had been directed essentially towards sickness insurance, was too restrictive. Invalidity, old-age and survivors' insurance merited just as much attention as sickness insurance, and in 1936 the Conference accordingly decided to extend its scope and changed its name to the International Social Insurance Conference (known as CIMAS, from the initials of its title in French).

¹ Hon. Director of the French National Federation of Social Security Institutions; member of the Bureau of the International Social Security Association.

² M. Stack: *Forty years in the service of social security* (Geneva, ISSA, 1967), p. 43.

It should be emphasised that, from the outset, close links were forged between the International Conference and the International Labour Office. Albert Thomas, the ILO's Director, at once sensed the advantage which the ILO's efforts to promote social protection could derive from the support of direct representatives of the insured public, and he warmly welcomed the new body's establishment. At its Second General Assembly in 1928 he left no doubt about his views on the matter:

Our international Organisation, our Office, would be only a vain bureaucracy if we were not surrounded by all the vital forces of social life, if we were not conscious of being surrounded by intellectual forces, trade union forces, mutualist forces; in a word, by everything throughout the world that aspires to a better social life. . . . It is in this spirit that I am happy to greet your organisation today.¹

Among the results of this collaboration with the ILO were the choice of its building in Geneva as the seat of the International Conference's Secretariat and the appointment of Adrien Tixier, hitherto chief of the ILO's Social Insurance Section, as its Secretary-General.

Naturally, the Second World War interrupted the activities of the CIMAS. Nevertheless it was during that dark period of human history that a new and much broader concept of social protection appeared with the publication of the Beveridge Report. This, it may be said, was the birth of social security. For the first time the legitimacy (not only in human and social but also in economic terms) of collective coverage of all the social needs of people in every class and occupation was proclaimed and, certainly in principle, widely accepted. The terms of the Declaration of Philadelphia adopted by the ILO in 1944 bear witness to the evolution that had taken place.

1947: rebirth

Once peace had been restored the CIMAS needed to adapt to the new situation. In September 1946, therefore, its Bureau prepared a number of proposed amendments to the Constitution, including one to rename the organisation the "International Social Security Association" (ISSA). These were adopted virtually without change by the General Assembly held in Geneva in October 1947, which was attended by representatives of organisations from 14 countries, all European with the exception of Palestine.

Essentially, the new Association's aims and methods of work, as laid down in article 1 of its Constitution, remained unchanged from those of the Conference, namely

to co-ordinate internationally and to strengthen efforts towards the extension, the protection, and the technical and administrative improvement of social security, particularly by (a) the organisation of periodical international meetings of its members, (b) the exchange of information and the comparison of experiences in the matter of the activities of its members.

¹ Stack, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-49.

One point, however, gave rise to prolonged discussion. In some countries the enactment of new legislation was leading to the nationalisation of social security and its administration by public or semi-public boards. The fact of the matter was that the considerable extension of social protection in terms both of persons and of risks covered made frequent legislative and regulatory intervention by governments inevitable and, in cases where schemes continued to be administered by private bodies, justified close supervision by the State. Among the tasks of this Constituent Assembly was to define, in article 2 of the Constitution, the criteria for membership of the Association. The question was whether to admit government departments or to restrict membership to autonomous organisations having a corporate existence distinct from that of the State. This was an important issue, since the decision taken would evidently condition the whole complexion of the new Association.

Almost unanimously, the delegates rejected the affiliation of government departments as such. It was felt that their presence in an "official" capacity would give the Association a political character that was alien to its vocation; moreover, governments already possessed in the ILO a forum in which they could make their views known. On the other hand there was unanimous agreement in favour of admitting those government services or departments that were directly administering social security. Any other decision would have meant that a number of major schemes were denied representation. Article 2 was therefore worded as follows: "Central institutions, national unions of institutions or of mutual benefit societies, and ministerial departments administering social security or one of its branches shall be eligible for membership in the Association."

At the time one would have been justified in asking whether this did not make the new Association a hybrid creature that was unlikely to function smoothly. Would heads of public departments, representatives of mutual benefit societies, salaried administrators and principals of autonomous institutions really be able to work together in harmony? The experience of the past 30 years makes it possible to reply with a categorical affirmative. Indeed, it may even be said that the Association's mixed composition is one of the essential factors accounting for its success and for the rich diversity of its activities. Each member institution gives the others the benefit of its experience, keeps them informed of its successes and setbacks, reports problems that have arisen and expresses its views on the evolution of social security—all on a footing of absolute equality. And since the Association is not a place where social policy is laid down in black and white or where formal undertakings are entered into there is great freedom in the exchange of information and ideas.

Thus the creation of the International Social Security Association in October 1947 followed from a fundamental and completely original decision that has continued to guide its work ever since.

A few figures will help to illustrate its development in the course of the past three decades. In 1947 there were 39 member institutions in 20 countries,

most of them in Western Europe. By 1957 the number of members had risen to 139. The great majority of countries in the Western Hemisphere, including the United States, were now represented in the Association, which moreover kept in close touch with the Inter-American Committee on Social Security. Institutions from 2 African, 11 Asian and 6 more European countries, including the USSR, had also joined. Today there are 246 members coming from 104 countries, so that the Association may reasonably take pride in its universality.

No doubt the reason for this success is the obvious fact that those who bear the heavy responsibility of running social security schemes need an international forum in which they can meet and discuss matters of mutual interest. However, it would be unjust to overlook the contribution of those whose personal efforts helped to make the ISSA the efficient instrument that was required, and in particular the late Presidents, Arthur Jauniaux, Renato Morelli and Reinhold Melas, and the late Secretaries-General, Rudolf Metall and Leo Wildmann, all of whom brought to the common task a dedication, a force of character and a clearness of vision which continue to compel our admiration.

Structure

The ISSA comprises both administrative and technical organs. Like all other organisations its supreme authority is the General Assembly of its members, which takes place every three years. In addition to being the only organ empowered to amend the Constitution, the General Assembly is of course entitled to deal with any matter falling within the Association's competence. However, owing to the unwieldiness arising from the presence of several hundred delegates and the long intervals between its meetings it cannot conveniently deal with the detailed administration of the Association's manifold activities, and the Constitution therefore entrusts the practical running of affairs to two smaller bodies, namely the Council and the Bureau.

The Council consists of one titular delegate per country, designated by all the ISSA member institutions in that country, and a number of substitute delegates. Only the titular delegate has the right to vote. The Council adopts the Association's triennial programme of activities, fixes the level of contributions, and accepts or rejects applications for membership. It also appoints the members of the Bureau for a three-year term of office, and the President who, in addition to assuming over-all responsibility for the smooth running of the Association, represents it in dealings with all outside bodies and with the Director-General of the ILO.

The Bureau, which has 23 members plus the chairmen of the permanent technical committees (see below), meets once or twice a year. It deals with current business, keeps an eye on the implementation of the Council's decisions, and approves the annual work programme for the Association's various technical organs.

The Secretariat, under the authority of the Secretary-General (who is also elected by the Council), constitutes the Association's permanent administrative,

financial and technical machinery. Responsible as they are for servicing the various statutory bodies and implementing their decisions, the Secretary-General and his staff are the linchpin of the organisation.

The technical organs of the Association are many and complex, having to cover all branches of social security while at the same time catering for the wide diversity of the member institutions. Some are concerned with several different kinds of risk, whereas others deal with only one, whether for specific socio-occupational groups or for an entire national population.

Thus the first permanent technical committees established by the ISSA covered particular branches of social security such as old-age, invalidity and survivors' insurance; family allowances; unemployment insurance and employment maintenance; medical care and sickness insurance; and insurance against employment accidents and occupational diseases.

However, certain general aspects of social security are of concern to all administrators, and it was not long before the need was felt to set up special machinery to deal with them. Accordingly, permanent technical committees now exist for organisation and methods; social security actuaries and statisticians; and legal aspects of social security. For many years now there has also been a committee on mutual benefit societies.

Each committee is free to fix its own programme of work for the coming three-year period, subject to the Council's approval. Member institutions can choose the committees on which they want to be represented.

On a number of occasions the Bureau has set up temporary joint working groups to enable two or more permanent committees to combine forces in studying a particular problem in depth. For instance, members of the Committee of Actuaries and Statisticians have collaborated with members of the Committee on Medical Care in investigating the cost of sickness insurance; again, experts from the latter committee have joined others from the Committee on Insurance against Employment Accidents to examine the role of social security in preventive medicine. In other cases ad hoc working groups have been set up to consider a specific research topic such as social security for self-employed persons or the relations between social security and social welfare services.

Another permanent committee that deserves special mention is that on the prevention of occupational risks, which, in addition to functioning in the same way as all the other committees, co-ordinates the activities of the "international sections". These are concerned with particular aspects of prevention and with prevention in particular industries or occupations. Their secretariats are provided by member institutions. The Permanent Committee on the Prevention of Occupational Risks also organises specialised symposia and, every four years, the World Congresses on Accident Prevention which are open not only to ISSA members but to any person or organisation concerned in any way with the prevention of employment injuries.

These structures, by combining technical specialisation with universal geographical coverage and facilitating the exchange of information and ideas

on a world-wide basis, are fully consonant with the broadened concept of social security to which reference was made above.

However, the fact remains that the degree of social protection afforded by the legislation of different countries varies widely from one continent to another. Moreover, the problems are not the same in Europe and in the developing countries. The types of benefit provided have to correspond to the economic and social characteristics of individual countries if social security coverage is to be really effective. The ISSA obviously has to take all these different needs into account, and it has accordingly organised regular regional conferences in Africa and Asia, and quite recently in Europe as well. In the Western Hemisphere regional interests are served by close co-operation between the ISSA and the Inter-American Committee on Social Security. In this way member institutions in each continent can meet to consider matters of common interest and where necessary adapt the administrative methods or general principles of social security to particular regional circumstances.

In the course of the past few years, moreover, the Bureau has taken a number of decisions tending to strengthen still further the ISSA's activities in the developing countries. Thus regional offices have been established in various parts of the world in order to co-ordinate activities within the respective regions and to ensure close liaison with headquarters.

The various organs described above are concerned essentially with the handling of problems arising out of the day-to-day administration of social security. They exchange information on legislation and methods of work, evaluate the progress achieved and suggest further improvements in coverage or administrative techniques, all of which is certainly invaluable to those responsible for the effective conduct of social security schemes.

However, this kind of activity, focusing as it does on the present and the immediate future, takes no account of the long-term economic, demographic and social trends which will inevitably shape the more distant future of social security—trends that are already making themselves felt throughout the world with unprecedented force. In view of the profound changes that lie ahead, medium- and long-term solutions to social problems must be sought not so much in past experience as in intelligent anticipation of the future. Hence the development of prospective research into various aspects of social security that has taken place in many countries during the past ten years or so.

It would have been unthinkable for the ISSA to have stood aloof from a movement such as this which, to a perhaps unique degree, implies international dialogue and consultation. In 1966, therefore, the Advisory Committee on Social Security Research was established, the basic function of which is to advise the Bureau on the selection of suitable subjects for research. Inevitably these are varied and usually multidisciplinary; among the topics studied, for example, have been: women and social security; problems of social security under conditions of economic recession and inflation; social security and divorce; and the implications for social security of research on ageing and retirement.

The subjects approved by the Bureau are studied by round-table groups consisting of a small number of experts from member institutions together with a few particularly highly qualified people unconnected with them. Representatives of the competent ISSA permanent committees are also associated with these discussions so as to maintain active co-operation and liaison between the principal organs of the Association and these specialised groups. It is no exaggeration to say that such research meetings have always given rise to extremely interesting and valuable exchanges, and there is no doubt that this kind of activity needs to be continued and expanded.

Publications

The meetings of the ISSA's constituent bodies are in themselves a very effective means of consultation and information. Nevertheless, their work would be of limited value if it were not made known to a wider public. The Association therefore endeavours to publish the main results of their deliberations which, in view of the number of meetings held, subjects discussed and languages used (four or five), represents a very considerable task.

Reports drawn up for the permanent committees are published by offset. Usually they consist of one part containing a number of national monographs and another attempting to draw the threads together in a general synthesis. Taken as a whole, these reports constitute an unparalleled dossier on the evolution of law and practice relating to the various branches of social security.

In addition, the ISSA publishes the *International Social Security Review*, which contains many articles concerning both national social security schemes and international problems in this field. The *Review* also systematically reports on the most important changes in relevant national legislation and provides summary accounts of meetings held under the Association's auspices. A recent poll of members' opinions regarding the quality of ISSA services showed that the *Review* is held in high esteem.

Parallel to the development of the Association's research activities a series entitled *Studies and Research* has been launched. Produced at irregular intervals, the volumes contain the reports and papers of the various research meetings. Among them are documents of genuine originality constituting valuable contributions to the literature on the present and future state of social security.

The Association would have been less successful in its international mission if it had omitted to assist in making known the very numerous works on social security issued in various parts of the world. There is a very rich literature on the subject, but knowledge of it is often restricted by national frontiers and language barriers. The ISSA's quarterly *World Bibliography of Social Security* helps to overcome these obstacles by drawing attention to the more important works appearing in different countries.

Among the numerous other publications of the Association are the documents produced in connection with the regular International Conferences

of Actuaries and Statisticians in Social Security, the reports prepared for the regional conferences, and studies on the application of data-processing techniques to social security administration. Altogether it can be said that the ISSA produces a very important and varied range of documentation.

A fine example of international co-operation

As will be clear from the preceding pages, the Association maintains an impressive organisational structure and programme of activities, yet its Secretariat is very small. This obvious disproportion between its aims and its means is compensated for by the direct and constant collaboration of its members, and this is no doubt one of the ISSA's most remarkable features.

Long and complicated as they often are, the questionnaires sent out by the ISSA always elicit an astonishingly high rate of response, while the reports analysing their results are prepared by officials of the member institutions with the full agreement of the latter. The voluntary support of these institutions, which far exceeds their constitutional obligations, takes many other forms too, for example seconding experts to the Secretariat for given periods, paying for certain editing and translation costs, and covering a very large part of the expenses incurred in holding the General Assembly or meetings of working groups, permanent committees and the like.

The way in which member institutions make material and competent personnel available to the ISSA—under no other obligation than their desire to share in the common effort—provides a rare example of international co-operation. It is made possible only by a very full measure of agreement regarding the methods and aims of the Association.

Conclusion

In the course of the past 50 years the theory, legislation and administrative practice of social security have undergone swift and profound changes. Thanks to the flexibility of its organisational structure the ISSA, like the two International Conferences that preceded it, has been able to adapt rapidly and without major difficulty to the new problems these changes have thrown up. Similarly the constant and remarkably active collaboration of all the member institutions has enabled it to increase the volume of its activities considerably despite the very modest size of the Secretariat.

The ISSA is not a standard-setting organisation, nor is it competent to draw up texts that will have the force of international law. Its role is a more modest but none the less necessary one, happily complementing the work of other international organisations and of the ILO in particular. As we have seen, the CIMAS entertained close relations with the ILO right from the beginning. This collaboration has been unceasing, and it is proper to acknowledge all the material and technical assistance the ISSA has received from the

ILO. Still more important, however, is the complementarity of the work carried out by the two organisations in pursuance of their specific aims and within their respective jurisdictions. The harmonisation of their work programmes in the field of social security has never run into any serious difficulties, and relations between the two organisations have always been conducted in a spirit of mutual understanding.

It may truly be said that the ISSA—affording as it does an invaluable forum and meeting place for social security administrators from all over the world—is a powerful weapon in the campaign to achieve ever more complete social protection through active international co-operation. ■

Publications of the International Labour Office

Social security for migrant workers

This study analyses succinctly yet in some detail the legal and administrative problems of social security arising out of the provision of full protection for migrant workers and their families. It indicates also the solutions to those problems prescribed in the various kinds of instruments for the co-ordination of national laws and regulations that have been adopted by the Members of the International Labour Organisation and of other international bodies, especially in Europe, where the protection of migrant workers in the field of social security has made the greatest headway. As a guide to the international and multinational instruments at present in force, the study should be particularly useful in those countries where the protection of migrant workers is not yet fully secured. A detailed bibliography of the subject is included among several appendices to the study.

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