7th ICSDAP Conference in Bangladesh: Some Experiences and Reflections for the Way Forward

Asok Kumar Sarkar¹, Mamunur Rahman² and Manohar Pawar³

Abstract
In the light of the unique experiences of the 7th ICSDAP Conference, this article includes a brief background, details of activities, challenges and opportunities, and outputs and outcomes. Our experiences and reflections suggest that organising international conferences to bring social development scholars together to deliberate on mutual areas of research and practice interests undoubtedly contributes to critical examination and dissemination of knowledge, at least to some extent. In addition, what is equally important, the process and experience of organising conferences appear to enhance our and host organisation’s learning and capacity-building, yielding benefit for everyone to build a better future by overcoming all the odds.

Keywords
ICSDAP, social development, organising conferences, reflections and knowledge sharing

¹ Chairperson, International Consortium for Social Development Asia and Pacific Branch and Department of Social Work, Visva-Bharati University, West Bengal, India.
² Department of English, Islamic University, Kushtia, Bangladesh and Joint-Coordinator, 7th ICSDAP Conference.
³ President, International Consortium for Social Development and School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, NSW, Australia.

Corresponding author:
Manohar Pawar, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, NSW 2678, Australia.
E-mail: MPawar@csu.edu.au
The International Consortium for Social Development (ICSD) is a not-for-profit organisation working at the global level using a social development approach (ICSD, 2015). Its main objective is to create and disseminate knowledge for social development worldwide. The ICSD firmly believes ‘that the goals of human realisation, equality, human rights, peace and social and economic justice can only be reached through comprehensive, collective, remedial and developmental efforts’ (ICSD, 2015). The goals of the ICSD (2015) are to:

1. expand and refine the knowledge base of social development within the international context,
2. clarify the ethics, roles and skills required by social development practitioners,
3. assist in the development of educational programmes and curriculum content based on the social development approach.
4. work toward the creation and maintenance of peace and social justice internationally, nationally and locally.
5. direct effort and resources to enable participation of both economically developing and developed countries in achieving social development goals.
6. sustain a process of mutual consultation and cooperative action among individual and institutional members.
7. assist members in economically developing and developed countries in the design, implementation and evaluation of social development projects.

It started in the 1970s by a group of social work educators and presently, its members include students, researchers, intellectuals and practitioners from an interdisciplinary background such as social work, community and social development, health, human services and development studies. The ICSD Asia-Pacific Branch, that is, ICSDAP is an operational arm of ICSD at a regional level, which was established in 2004. The ICSDAP organises biennial conferences—its earlier conferences were held in Thammasat University, Pattaya, Thailand (1st), 18–20 October 2006; in Nepal (2nd), 25–28 November 2008; in Seoul National University (3rd), 10–12 November 2010; in Yogyakarta, Indonesia (4th), 27–30 June 2012; in Visva-Bharati, India (5th), 16–18 January 2015; and in University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka (6th), 29 September–1 October 2016. The 7th ICSDAP Conference took place at Islamic University Bangladesh (IUB), 14–15 September 2019.

Professor Manohar Pawar, being the founder president (presently known as chairperson), led the ICSDAP branch activities until the 6th Conference (see Pawar, 2017). His leadership and team spirit were responsible for establishing the Branch on a solid shape and creating its outstanding image among the students, intellectuals and development practitioners of the Asia-Pacific countries and beyond. Then Professor Asok Sarkar was nominated as the chairperson of the ICSDAP in July 2017. Although Professor Sarkar was initially reluctant and not sure of himself, Professor Pawar had an eye to sense his leadership and organising capabilities and encouraged him to successfully lead the organisation. Meanwhile,
Professor Pawar assumed the new responsibility of President-ICSD (global body). As Professor Sarkar did not have enough experience to deal with certain critical issues, the president guided him at every step to go ahead and progress and was instrumental in building up his confidence. As chairperson of the branch, Professor Sarkar was responsible for organising 7th ICSDAP Conference and searching for a host. He started with his neighbouring country ‘Bangladesh, which was purposefully chosen for organising the conference due to three reasons’. First, the ICSDAP biennial conference was not so far held in Bangladesh, second, Professor Sarkar personally knew many social work professors of international repute in Bangladesh and third, it was convenient for him to travel frequently in Bangladesh to explore the possibilities of a successful conference.

First, Professor Sarkar had a discussion with a colleague, a very proactive teacher of the Department of Social Work, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh. He wanted to explore the possibility of organising the conference within six months. As the time was very short and he indicated many more other difficulties, our search continued. As time was running out, Professor Pawar asked him to find out the possibilities of organising the conference in Dhaka, hoping that may be convenient for many participants. Professor Sarkar consulted another colleague at the Institute of Social Welfare and Research several times to explore whether the University of Dhaka could host the conference. Partial promises were made and we were hopeful, however, after a long wait, we were informed that under the given circumstances, Dhaka University was not in a position to organise the conference. The whole process ate up a significant portion of our valuable time. Again, countrywide preparation started for holding election in Bangladesh. Thus, given the constraints of timeframe and terms and conditions of the ICSDAP, Professor Sarkar felt almost puzzled and hopeless with regards to the idea of hosting the 7th ICSDAP Conference in Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, Professor Pawar contacted Professor P. C. Sarker asking him whether he is able to organise the conference under his leadership in Dhaka. Professor Sarker (personal communication, 22 May 2018) promptly responded as follows:

Dear Professor Pawar,
Thank you very much for your interest and proposal to organize an ICSDAP conference in Dhaka. I need to inform you that at present we don’t have Social Work Department which would be helpful to take initiative for the conference. In the meantime, I have already talked to the Islamic University in Kushtia (public university). It is situated outside Dhaka. The university has already introduced Social Welfare Department under my leadership in 2018. The university might be interested to host the conference but they need to get detail information which should include time schedule, total participants, partial financial support from any organization, registration fees, etc.

Further, Professor Pawar asked Professor Sarkar to follow up this lead, which helped his meeting with Professor P. C. Sarker in a conference in the middle of 2018 that took place in Dhaka. Professor P. C. Sarker is a well-known personality in social work education in Bangladesh. At the time, he was the vice chancellor of
the Royal University of Dhaka. When he came to Kolkata for some personal work, Professor Sarkar met him and expressed his interest once again to host this conference in Bangladesh. Professor P. C. Sarker discussed the issue with Professor Rashid Askari, vice chancellor and Professor Shahinoor Rahman, Pro vice chancellor, of IUB located at Kushtia. Professor Rahman was also having additional responsibility as head, Department of Social Work at IUB. Professor Rahman kindly agreed and convinced the authorities at IUB. The entire proposal moved ahead unconditionally. The authorities of IUB deputed Professor Mamunur Rahman, a learned person in English literature, as convenor for the conference. Finally, Professor Mamunur Rahman and Professor Sarkar worked together under the guidance of Professor P. C. Sarker and Professor Manohar Pawar.

Details of the Conference Activities

The initial task was to select a suitable theme, title and sub-themes of the conference, considering the local situation of Bangladesh, its neighbouring countries/South Asia, keeping in view the social development perspective. In this regard, Professor Sarkar had a face-to-face discussion with Professor P. C. Sarker again and telephonic conversation with Professor Mamunur Rahman and Professor Manohar Pawar. Finally, we all agreed to the title, ‘Social Unrest, Peace and Development’. The first announcement was made with the dates 27–28 April 2019. An overwhelming response through abstract submissions from India was noticed. When registration started, Professor Sarkar personally mobilised around 30 persons (among those who submitted abstracts) for registration and the same included postgraduate students, PhD research scholars and faculty members. Until the first week of March 2019, more than 50 per cent who submitted abstracts and registered were from India. Amidst, a sudden development was noticed. The Government of India declared Lok Sabha Election in April 2019. Hence, many Indian participants who registered wanted to withdraw/cancel journey due to difficulties in obtaining visa, election duty (because of government employment), and a few wanted to participate in election campaign. It was really an awkward situation. The matter was discussed with the ICSDAP board members and the organising committee for a suitable decision. Finally, we decided to postpone the dates of the conference. As the monsoon was approaching and many places in Bangladesh were flood affected, we decided to delay four to five months further. We brought out a modified brochure with the dates, 14–15 September 2019. All the deadlines relating to abstract and paper submission were extended. Notwithstanding these changes, about 80 abstracts were received.

The issue of a lack of funding for the conference was a real worrying concern. Nowadays, there is a huge gap between the need and availability of financial support for organising a conference, especially in developing countries. Generally, strategies of sponsorship collection or fundraising is usually followed to organise a conference. Although ICSDAP uses a cost-recovery model, to ensure better representation of various provinces, countries, stakeholders and to have more
resourceful persons, additional funding is essential. Thus, our 7th ICSDAP Conference was not an exception. Two universities from South East Asia, that is, Thammasat University, Thailand, with the help of Professor Jitti Mongkolnchaicharunya, and Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS), with the inspiration of Professor Tan Ngoth Tiong, came ahead for collaboration. In addition, Professor Mamunur Rahman with his vibrant team made a strong drive for fundraising and thereby many organisations extended support generously. These supporters included Thengamara Mohila Sabuj Sangha, SETU, Partex Star Group, Ashirbad, Building for Future Ltd, Auto Rice Mills (Pvt) Ltd, Delta Life Insurance Company Ltd, Community Initiative Society, Gemcon City Limited, Mother Print, Pubali Bank, RHSTEP, Rokeya Foundation, CSS, DIPSHIKHA, Center for Natural Resource Studies, BRAC Bank, Damien Foundation Bangladesh, Eco-Social Development Organization, Southeast Bank Limited, Rupkotha Eco Resort, etc.

In order to speed up the conference preparation, Professor Sarkar travelled to IUB in July 2019. IUB is located on a rural campus of 175 acres, in the middle of two district towns, about five-hours road travel from Dhaka. The land of the campus comes within the jurisdiction of both districts. The IUB was comprised of eight faculties, 34 departments, along with eight residential halls. There were altogether 15,417 students, 412 teachers, 425 officers and 399 employees. The conference organising committee was constituted and several sub-committees were focusing on venue management, transport, accommodation, fundraising, food, press and media, cultural programme, abstract book cum souvenir development, etc. IUB had its own means of transportation with around 40 vehicles and buses. They decided to pick up all the foreign delegates and resource persons from Dhaka and a nearest border between Bangladesh and India by their own vehicles. Considering the security issue, accommodation for almost all the participants was arranged in the campus guest houses. Some temporary accommodation arrangement was made in an empty newly constructed building meant for staff members. The main auditorium was chosen for the inauguration programme, special lectures and valedictory session. Most of the parallel sessions were organised in arts faculty and business faculty classrooms. University authorities and the organising committee made sincere efforts to organise the conference successfully. Particularly, vice chancellor, pro vice chancellor & treasurer, the three important pillars of IUB campus, worked unitedly in a single tone.

The long-pending and much-awaited 7th ICSDAP Conference finally took place on 14th and 15th September 2019. There were representations from five countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Finland, India and Thailand. Altogether, 260 participants joined the conference including 45 foreign delegates. On the first day, after the inaugural session, a keynote speech on ‘Social Unrest, Peace and Social Development’ was delivered by Professor Manohar Pawar, President-ICSD. In his keynote speech, Pawar stated that the theme of the conference is closely connected to goal number four, peace and social justice, of the ICSD, stated above. By providing historical background of the ICSD and conceptual clarity of social development, he argued that following a social development approach
helps to promote peace, prevent unrest and sustain development. Unrest and violence are caused by us and we can prevent them (Pawar, 2019a). In a special session on ‘Social Development in Bangladesh’ by Professor Harun-Ur-Rashid Askari, vice chancellor, IUB, it was argued that

Despite all setbacks in the process of global peace, it is not all doom and gloom for mankind if they can grow as good social workers and build a community with a shared future. Mutual tolerance and peaceful coexistence should be the foremost survival policy of the people living in a pluralistic society. The world is a melting pot of castes, creeds and religions. And hence, to exist is to coexist! (Askari, 2019)

All the papers were presented in parallel sessions. In three slots, in two days, 16 sessions took place where total of 64 papers were deliberated. The sub-themes of the sessions included ‘globalisation, social unrest, and challenges of peace and development’, ‘economic disparity and its implications for achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs)’, ‘population growth and social unrest’, ‘women and their role in social development’, ‘education, peace and society’, ‘disaster management and ecology’, ‘peace and political processes’, ‘youth in social unrest’, ‘digital technology and unrest’, ‘NGOs in conflict resolution’, ‘health hazards and social safety’, ‘entrepreneurship development and the SDGs’, ‘gender inequality, violence’ and ‘education and sustainable development’ (ICSDAP & IUB, 2019). On the first day, there was also poster presentation by a team of four students from Thammasat University. On the second day morning, ‘Social Development Lecture’ was delivered by Professor P. C. Sarker, vice chancellor, Royal University of Dhaka, who emphasised the relevance of social development practice at micro, meso and macro levels. The ICSDAP has a practice of conferring Presidential Award, introduced in the 4th ICSDAP Conference held in Indonesia, for significant contributions to social development. After the morning lecture, awards were conferred on two educators and two practitioners.

The recipients were Profulla C. Sarkar, vice chancellor, Royal University of Dhaka, Bangladesh; Jitti Mongkolnchaiarunya, dean, Puey Ungphakorn School of Development Studies, Thammasat University, Thailand; Hosne-Ara Begum, director, TMSS, Bangladesh, and SETU, a national-level NGO of Bangladesh, respectively (ICSD, 2019). By bringing together leading social work educators, a very interesting and useful panel discussion on ‘Social Work Education Curriculum in Bangladesh’ was organised. Finally, the valedictory programme included important resolutions and recommendations emanating from the conference and these are discussed in the last section.

In addition, the 7th ICSDAP Conference also included cultural programmes and field visits. The first day evening was devoted to some artistic and folk performances. Few professional artists specialised in song, dance and drama made excellent presentations in the ‘Birshreshtha Hamidur Rahman Auditorium’. Participants hailing from five countries enjoyed and learnt the unique cultural tradition of Bangladesh. On the second day evening, a sightseeing was arranged to the nearby district town Kushtia. The name of the place was ‘Lalon Akhra’,
popular for the name of Lalon Shah, an internationally acclaimed mystic poet and singer. On the third day, that is, on 16th September, field visits were arranged for the foreign delegates. About 40 participants visited Tagore’s Kuthibari at Shelaidah and the activities of SETU, an NGO actively participated in this conference. Professor Pawar visited this agency to observe their social development work at the village level (see Pawar, 2019b).

**Challenges and Opportunities**

We have narrated in the background section that initially there were difficulties in finding out a host organisation and it took a lot more time than expected. Based on our experience and reflections, we are of the view that good infrastructure or well-connected place should not be the sole criterion in selecting a host. Unconditional interest, team spirit and commitment to organising are crucial. We were able to see such interest and commitment at IUB. However, the conference had to be postponed due to Lok Sabha Elections of India. Thus, the political processes of the country or neighbouring country are also very vital while selecting the dates. The Department of Social Welfare at IUB was formed newly and did not have experienced staff members. Mobilising or attracting participants directly working in the social work or social development field was a big challenge throughout the preparation. As this conference was first of its kind for the IUB, it required our intensive engagement with organisers to support them. In some respects, the relatively remote location of the organiser was a bottleneck to attract the national-level participants. But IUB attracted participants from India as the Indian border was just two to three hours journey by bus and 50 per cent of the total paper presenters came from India travelling by road. As Professor Sarkar co-ordinated the conference, he had to provide advice and help to almost 30 Indian participants for obtaining visa and making travel arrangements. Although the conference organisers had kindly arranged international pickups from Dhaka, five hours travel by road was a significant commitment of time, but it also provided a rare opportunity for participants to see the countryside of Bangladesh. As the host department was very new, it was difficult to mobilise social work student volunteers, though students from other disciplines did support. Although it was challenging for new social work staff members and students, they did benefit from participating in the conference. The organising committee had taken the trouble to mobilise staff members and students from several other disciplines and it stimulated the interest of other staff members, who participated in the conference with enthusiasm. The leadership of the university, vice chancellor and pro vice chancellor, was highly committed to and genuinely engaged with the conference and that made a significant difference. This is the first time ICSDAP Conference received an extensive print and electronic media coverage under the leadership of Dr Mithun Mostafiz. It was a great opportunity for both IUB and ICSDAP to showcase their work to the public (see ICSDAP, 2019).
Outputs and Outcomes

The 7th ICSDAP Conference created an appropriate podium and opportunity at IUB campus for the academicians, research scholars and practitioners from five countries to update knowledge to interact and network with other scholars working in the same field and to think about accelerating social development processes, particularly in the context of Bangladesh. The main issues deliberated in the conference were problems of social work job placement and curriculum upgrading, values and ethics of social workers, indigenisation of social work, government policies for engaging social workers in government institutions, etc. The conference deliberations culminated into the following resolutions (Pawar & Sarkar, 2019):

1. During the conference, it was suggested that the name of the Department of Social Welfare be changed to the Department of Social Work and Social Development. The suggested nomenclature has already been approved in the academic council meeting of the IUB.

2. In place of the current undergraduate social work degree, a new degree titled a Bachelor of Social Work and Social Development may be introduced.

3. In place of the current or proposed postgraduate social work degree, a new degree titled as Master of Social Work and Social Development may be introduced.

4. Newly named Department of Social Work and Social Development may prepare to lead and organise a national-level workshop to develop social work and social development curriculum relevant to the Bangladesh context.

5. It was agreed to formulate a working committee consisting of five social work educators who joined the panel discussion, chaired by professor Pawar, during the conference to develop national-level social work and social development professional organisation to facilitate collaboration and cooperative action nationally and internationally to strengthen the profession and social work and social development education and practice under the leadership and guidance of Professor Profulla Sarker, vice chancellor, Royal University of Dhaka. Five-panel members were: Professor P. C. Sarkar (VC, Royal University, Dhaka), Professor Shahana Nasrin (University of Dhaka, Dhaka), Professor Anwar Hossain (Jagannath University, Dhaka), Professor Rabiul Islam (Rajshahi University, Rajshahi) and Dr Kirttebas Paul (Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet).

The purpose of this committee is to develop a national-level forum of social work educators in order to give direction and address the challenges of the social work profession in Bangladesh. It is expected that the forum would contribute to increasing trained and skilled personnel in the social work profession that might accelerate the social development processes.
6. Basic social work and social development textbooks should be acquired by the library so that students have access to ready reading material. A list of recommended books was submitted.

7. A few experienced teaching staff members be appointed to build the department.

As the conference organising funds are raised from participants and donors, financial accountability and transparency are crucial. The host organisation has submitted the financial balance sheet/statement of the conference, which showed surplus of Bangladesh Taka 157,128 (US$1,800). The ICSDAP advised the host department to utilise surplus funds to organise the social work and social development curriculum development workshops and related department development activities.

As stated earlier, the conference received an extensive media coverage, which benefitted both the public and organising institutions (see ICSDAP, 2019). The conference also produced an expression of interest in organising the 8th ICSDAP Conference by Thammasat University in Thailand.

Our reflections suggest that despite difficulties, ICSDAP should continue to organise these and similar conferences as they provide important opportunities for social development scholars to come together and reflect on social development thought. When physical gathering is not feasible, alternative digital-based platforms may be created and used to achieve the same purpose.

On the whole, Vice Chancellor Professor Rashid Askari’s and his team’s genuine scholarly engagement with the conference on the one hand and warm hospitality with a personal touch on the other have uniquely revealed how the culture of care and knowledge can be woven together to create a peaceful world. We hope these resolutions will be implemented under his leadership and the Department of Social Work and Social Development of IUB will flourish.

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ORCID iD
Manohar Pawar https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2836-1345

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