

WOVA attends Chernobyl Humanitarian Conference

Trustees David and Valerie Tee joined fellow trustee Nigel Roberts at a recent keynote Chernobyl conference. Nigel also facilitated a workshop session on sustainable development. Held in Newcastle on 3rd May, the 11th Humanitarian Conference was hosted by Chernobyl Continuity and the Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the United Kingdom. Speakers included the Belarusian Ambassador, His Excellency Aleksandr Mikhnevich, along with the Deputy Ministers of Humanitarian Affairs, Education and Labour & Social Welfare on behalf of the government of Belarus. The main address was given by Doctor Uli Mallick, a clinical oncologist and specialist in thyroid care from Newcastle General Hospital.

Over 120 delegates attended the conference, including staff from the Belarusian Embassy in London and representatives of many of the charities working to alleviate the consequences of the Chernobyl catastrophe in the areas of Belarus still blighted by radiation fall-out. As well as hearing from the main speakers on key matters of interest and concern to the work of charitable organisations and NGOs, the charities themselves were given the opportunity to give presentations on their own activities.

The afternoon was devoted to workshop activity. Nigel Roberts gave a short address on the principles of sustainable development, which has been described by the Bruntland Commission as being "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". The Commission was created by the United Nations to meet concerns "about the accelerating deterioration of the human environment and natural resources and the consequences of that deterioration for economic and social development."

Delegates heard Nigel's view that the most critical element of sustainable development is ownership and leadership on the part of communities themselves.

Or as Malcolm Chisholm, former Minister for Communities in the Scottish Executive has said -

"Only by genuinely engaging with local people can we develop services which meet local needs and aspirations. In particular, the effective engagement of local people is critical to the regeneration of our most disadvantaged communities... It is only by listening to the experiences and ideas of the people who live in these communities that we can find solutions which will make a lasting difference"

The key issue is to give individuals and communities the opportunity and ability to shape their lives. This process has 5 features –

- **information** – the issue and intended outcomes
- **consultation** – what do you think about the options for action?
- **deciding together** – choosing and making decisions in partnership
- **acting together** – implementation by collaboration
- **supporting local initiatives** – enabling local people to act; take decisions; make changes; and *take control*

In all of this, the role of local people is critical, because they are –

- experts on the needs of their communities;
- key partners in the design and delivery of services which impact on their lives;
- individuals and communities of interest with vital information; and
- those with not to whom we do things

There was a useful debate on these issues at the workshop, with contributions from a number of charities engaged in work of a similar profile to WOVA. All of them are working to build capacity within Belarusian communities themselves.

Overall, the key message of the conference was that a great deal of extremely important and significant work is being undertaken across a range of activities, in partnership with the authorities in Belarus. The key challenge for all in this field is to ensure real co-ordination and joined-up work in the search to share best practice.

Nigel Roberts

West Oxfordshire Vetka Association

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