

Pelham House hosts European Susila Dharma Meeting

By Ridwan Kennedy, SD Britain

From Thursday 25 January until Sunday 28 January forty members representing SD International and SD National bodies from various European countries, Norway and North America met in Lewes. All SD (Britain) Board members attended and Ridwan Kennedy gives his recollection of the meeting below.

It was my first visit to Pelham House and I was impressed by the quality of the accommodation, if not by the size of the car park. I was also delighted to see a wide range of paintings and sculptures by Subud artists elegantly displayed within the Hotel.

Sharifin Gardiner, Rosanne Hille and Virginia Thomas had devised a programme of workshops and testing to help draft a set of goals for the next three years as we approach World Congress 2010.

It was a chance for us to meet Virginia Thomas, who has been appointed SD International Executive Director. She is a warm and humorous person, who has been a very successful fundraiser for SD Canada.

I arrived on the Friday evening when European and North American SD Groups compared their constitutions and how they worked. There were amazing variations:

- Germany and Norway included non-Subud members in their decision making processes and as donors;
- Canada charges \$20 to become a SD member;
- Germany funds a part-time secretary, has a permanent office and circulates a newsletter weekly;
- There are no SD Groups in Austria or Italy;
- Britain rarely funds SD members to visit projects. Germany will not fund a project unless a Board member is willing and able to visit it, because a member speaking from first hand experience is an excellent fund raiser, and more able to evaluate the validity of the project.

On Saturday morning two workshops took place. Mine was a sedate affair on ideas to improve communications with members -

Finding and using the skills SD members had, encouraging members to join SD to develop their talents, using humour, linking a group or a member with a specific project, finding out what small scale projects members were already doing, but not labelled SD, the idea that SD made Subud life more exciting. This last idea came from Sebastian Tedrow who has experienced how American group life has been stimulated by SD work in the neighbourhood. For me this opens up the concept of a group in Britain working with non-Subud partners on a local project.

But on return to the plenary session the other workshop on funding criteria was in intense session, so members wisely snatched a break on the sunlit terrace. The Funding Criteria Workshop was grappling with several points-

One of the issues that was being discussed was the desire to focus on funding projects which can become sustainable - you begin a project with seed money and it blossoms into a self sustaining organisation, thereby freeing up funds for investment elsewhere. The idea is to taper off our support for the day-to-day expenses of educational projects, but would consider capital items such as buildings, or other elements of the project. While at the same time encouraging these projects to become more sustainable and find alternative sources of funding.

In the afternoon I attended a Workshop on Africa and learned that at Bangalore it had been suggested we should move our priorities from countries like India (a middle income country), to Sub-Saharan Africa (low income countries).

However there is a real problem in getting evaluation and monitoring reports back from Sub-Saharan African countries. Without the ability to check on how money is being spent we cannot use our charitable funds. So we need to develop better links with NGO's like Oxfam, so that we can use their infrastructure on the ground to monitor projects.

We concentrated our discussions on the Congo where there are a number of projects vying for funds. There is confusion here between SD and the Subud organisation. (There is also confusion in Britain!) It would be good if International Helpers and SDI could develop a programme of regular joint visits, to strengthen the latihan and set up monitoring structures.

Sjarifah Roberts told us of a dream she had about Africa. She is a potter and she found herself in Africa looking at a European pedal powered potter's wheel. She found it strange to see it in Africa and even stranger was the clay being used, which was off-cuts from European pots. When she looked around she could see a rich red seam of clay in an adjoining bank of earth. Sjarifah felt that the dream meant that Africans should focus on their own materials and culture and not be too influenced by the West.

The other workshops were on India, Latin America, and Indonesia. Paloma de la Vina reported on a simple project to provide a mobile library touring some Argentinean schools. Lailah Armstrong reported on the ICDP project which has now reached 200,000 families in South America.

In the evening Lewes Group provided our visitors with an evening meal. I particularly enjoyed being waited at table by Edward McKenzie in his cooking apron.

On Sunday Sharifin announced that Lusana Blond (USA) had agreed to become his Deputy. The Blond Family Trust has generously supported SDI work for many years.

We then attempted through discussion, and a party game, to prioritise the work for SDI Executive over the next three years. It is hoped to present a common face to the world in terms of our vision, strategy and operating principles. Once it became clear that SD Executive were drafting principles that might be broken in exceptional circumstances, those SD Groups who felt threatened by rules relaxed.

Testing showed that each SD Group needed to be treated as an equal partner in its interface with SDI. Both sides agreed to recognise and work at this way of operating. During testing the ladies felt that if we keep close together and support one another, we can achieve incredible things.

The SDI Executive will produce a 'draft' strategy for discussion at our next joint meeting. This will be on 26 August at the end of the International Gathering in Ascot.

The International Helpers (Andrew Holloway & Farah Czwiertnia) said how good it was to work with members really putting the latihan into practice.

A member not involved with SD said she felt quite daunted by the power and commitment of those present.

I hope this gives you a flavour of the event. Do come and meet SD members and see the exhibition in the marquee at Ascot in August.