

SOCIAL SECURITY, POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION  
IN RICH AND POORER COUNTRIES



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SOCIAL SECURITY, POVERTY  
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Peter SAUNDERS and Roy SAINSBURY  
(eds.)



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# REFLECTIONS ON PETER TOWNSEND'S CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIAL SECURITY RESEARCH

Jonathan BRADSHAW

*Peter Townsend was going to be presenting the opening plenary lecture at the FISS Sigtuna conference on which this collection is based. He died suddenly a week before the conference. Jonathan Bradshaw was asked by the FISS Governors to say a few words of appreciation at the opening of the conference. This is what he said.*

You will all have heard that Peter Townsend, our opening plenary speaker, died last week. He had bought his ticket, prepared his paper and we were all looking forward to hearing what he had to say. It is a great disappointment for us at the conference but more especially a great loss to his friends and most especially his wife Jean Corston and his family – to whom we send deepest sympathy. Jean has told us that the day before he died he had finished the Introduction to his edited book on social security in development (Townsend 2009) and that he was very pleased with it. His opening plenary was to be on the case for universal child benefits in developing countries.

Peter's research and scholarship was extraordinary in volume, scope and impact. It encompassed older people, disablement, human rights, health inequalities, social policy and, of course, poverty (the theme of this conference) (see Walker 2010). His research on poverty transformed our thinking. He had reconceptualised poverty as relative before he was 30. He had rediscovered poverty in Britain (with Brian Abel Smith) before he was 40. His great work on poverty – *Poverty in the United Kingdom* (Townsend 1979) first showed how relative deprivation could be measured. He was a keen supporter of the Breadline Britain methodology that developed out of his thinking. We are all (including the EU and the OECD) now measuring poverty using his concepts and methods.

Peter Townsend was a great scholar but he also had the inestimable advantage of writing like a dream – with perfect clarity and huge passion. He was also a campaigner and reformer, a life-long socialist, he was active in the Fabian Society, and founded and led the Child Poverty Action Group and the Disability Alliance.

In his 70s he started to teach a course at the London School of Economics on human rights and social policy and began to publish work articulating the case for social security in developing countries. He argued that poor countries should be following the example of most rich countries and developing universal child benefits. He believed that international institutions and transnational corporations have an obligation to fund these benefits. He advocated that the sources of finance should include a Tobin tax on currency flows. There are still only a few models in developing countries of what he had in mind – perhaps the South African Child Support Grant (Barnes 2008), the Basic Income experiment being trialled in Namibia ([www.bignam.org/Publications/BIG\\_Assessment\\_report\\_08a.pdf](http://www.bignam.org/Publications/BIG_Assessment_report_08a.pdf)) and, partly in response to his advocacy, Argentina has just implemented a child benefit system for those excluded from the existing system for formal employees. The rest have nothing or at most highly targeted social assistance or conditional cash transfers, mere froth and window dressing, often inspired by the World Bank.

So this was what he was going to talk to us about. It was an important development of his work on poverty in developing countries and it was typically thinking ahead of the field. So let us be grateful for the life and work of Peter Townsend. He wanted to change the world. Let us try to do the same.

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