

A world shared

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Representatives from street papers from around the globe gather in Melbourne, Australia, to share skills, aspirations

It was in the middle of the 15th Annual Conference of the International Network of Street Papers that we all went home. Home being that place in the thick of it, in the bustle of a street paper office and around a table of vendors, staffers and volunteers, listening to the poetry of the streets, viewing the world through a vendor's eyes.

It was here, at the offices of the Big Issue Australia, host of this year's conference, that more than 60 delegates from street papers around the globe shared stories of the papers in their own towns to an inquisitive audience over paper plates of coleslaw and barbecue pork. It was a night that reinforced how similar we all are, despite living what can seem worlds apart.

But the troubles outside were never far away. Early in the evening, Csaba Levay with the Hungarian street paper Flaszter was drawn away to address a crisis in the Hungarian city of Debrecen, where the new government there had essentially declared it illegal to be homeless on the streets, and was shuttling the poor out of the city. What it will mean for the vendors of the paper there, in a region with tens of thousands of homeless inhabitants, is still unclear. But it is a condition that resonates with so many cities around the world where political and economic goals often clash with reality.

In more than 100 cities around the world, street papers work on the front lines of that reality, providing income

opportunities, community organizing, socialization and above all, a voice to tens of thousands of low-income and homeless individuals. There are nearly 30 in North America alone, including Street Roots, and as one of several regional networks of the INSP, the North American Street Newspaper Association works to strengthen the work of papers in the U.S. and Canada. While some papers are quite large, most are very small, struggling to keep pace in this challenging economy, with a demand that never seems to subside. (With the help of considerable local and international support, the INSP and the Big Issue Australia secured funding assistance and airline support to bring street paper delegates, many of them volunteers, to the conference.)

No one starts a street paper thinking it's going to be easy or fun, or even a simple solution to a complex problem. They start one because there is consistently, in every community, a need for people who are marginalized by government and society to have a voice and earn a basic living, and street papers fill that void. And from that dynamic comes amazing expressions for both understanding poverty and creating new opportunities for people struggling to survive it.

BISS, the newspaper in Munich, for example, is working to buy a defunct prison building to transform it into a hotel for socially minded tourists, employing people experiencing homelessness and even incorporating low- or no-cost housing on site. In London, the newspaper Big Issue UK has developed a series of videos called Real Lives, Real Achievement that drive home the fact that people shouldn't be resigned to the perpetuation of homelessness, and that the potential lies in all of us to change our world.

In Melbourne, the Big Issue Australia's Women's Subscriptions Enterprise will employ women, who often are uncomfortable or unsafe vending the paper publicly, in sheltered workshops to distribute papers to subscribing businesses. The paper also launched an in-house classroom, which has become part of the local curriculum for young students to educate them about homelessness.

In Denver, the street paper Denver Voice is finding creative ways to spread awareness of who their vendors are, including guerrilla parades to send a big "Thank You" to readers in the downtown Denver area. In Portland, we've opened a distribution office on the city's eastside to reach a new population of vendors and readers.

This year, in addition to workshops and training on common concerns, the INSP membership came together to send a unified message that street papers are a viable enterprise for alleviating poverty worldwide. Every day, micro philanthropists trade dollars, kroners, rand, yen and pounds for their local street



Top, Caroline Charron (far left, seated next to a translator) listens to Margaret Rossal from Brazil. Charron is a volunteer who recently started the magazine *Macadam* in France. Above, Reah Medenilla from *Jeepney* magazine in The Philippines talks with a Big Issue Australia vendor.

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Joanne Zuhl is the managing editor of Street Roots and the vice chairperson of the International Network of Street Papers.

After touring their offices, there's no question that the Big Issue Australia is an impressive operation, with a crew of people committed to their work in alleviating poverty and empowering the poor across the continent. But I couldn't help coming away from a tour of their offices with a better appreciation for our crew here in Portland. We're widely divergent in the look of our papers and the scope of our resources and staff, but we are, at the root of it all, quite similar. Every two weeks, vendors gather at the office to reconnect with each other and get a rundown of operations and coverage. And after chatting with several vendors before the meeting at the Big Issue, it's clear that we share the same concerns and aspirations: the time and cost of getting around town, anticipation for the new paper, creative pitches for their own vending micro-enterprise. They could just have well have been the folks you see selling the paper here in Portland. Then again, our vendors are second to none. Call me biased — I can take it.