

Servas' challenges and opportunities

Dear friends of Servas New Zealand,

thank you very much for inviting me to your AGM 2017.

I hope that you're having a pleasant and productive meeting. Last time I met some of you, Servas New Zealand was arranging the SI conference and general assembly of 2015. It turned out to be a successful meeting and a good starting point for the whole organisation and for us in SI Exco, the global board of Servas International.

Please let me introduce myself. My name is Jonny Sågänger, I'm the president of Servas International and a citizen of Sweden. I have been SI's president since 2012 when I was first elected. I was reelected at the SI General Assembly in October 2015.

I will give you my view of where I think Servas is today, where we're heading and which opportunities and challenges we face for the future.

Genuine travel experiences

Servas is part of a growing movement which has its roots in cheaper travels, increasing wealth and mobility. There's also a growing interest among travelers to get more out of your journeys than just seeing the surface of a society: the facades and interiors of hotel room and museums, historical places and the beauty of nature.

An increasing number of travelers are looking for genuine person-to-person experiences.

Servas can offer such unique experiences, by making it possible for people to get an insight into the everyday life of people of different cultures.

Sharing culture

In today's world there's a lot of talk about sharing. This is also a growing part of the global economy. Servas members have always shared, we have shared memories, experiences, views on life, politics, religion, gender issues and hundreds of other subjects. And we have shared our homes.

The development of the sharing culture and then sharing economy fits Servas and it is one reason why our organisation will grow over the next decades.

I'm convinced that Servas will benefit from our status as a not-for-profit non governmental organisation. Since we're not for profit people don't need to be scared that we will exploit their personal data for commercial purposes.

As long as there's trust you can share all kinds of things.

Servas embracing the world

On a global level I think that Servas as a network and organisation has a role of growing importance to play at this moment in the history of human kind.

Servas' mission – according to the statutes, which is our organisation's constitution – is to provide opportunities for personal contacts among people of different cultures, backgrounds and nationalities. This mission is built on a vision that these personal encounters will promote goodwill and understanding between people and ultimately help build a more peaceful world.

This vision and mission to promote openness challenges some of the developments that have grown disappointingly strong around the world during the past five to ten years:

- * the religious and political intolerance promoted by organisations that advocate violent terrorism, far right nationalism and left wing extremism.

- * anti-globalism

- * the creation of divisions between people by building wall, rather than bridges. There are at the moment more that 150 great walls around the world and a new one is about to be built between the United States of America and Mexico. The number of such walls has increased during the last 20-30 years, the tearing down of the Iron curtain at the end of the 1980's being an positive exception.

Servas is a counterforce, since our organisation is intent to embrace the world. This is my interpretation of the statutes, as well as my experiences of being a member since 1984 and an active volunteer during the past ten years. We promote a global society that is open to new ideas, the richness of different cultures and people of all backgrounds.

I think Servas has a good foundation to build on.

This foundation actually consists of 5 separate cornerstones or foundations:

Foundation number 1:

A global identity. Since some years Servas has a global identity thanks to our standardised set of colours and the logo that was created by two members who are skilful media and marketing professionals.

The logo is used as a national Servas signature in more than 50 countries around the world. One reason it has become a success is that individual countries have the liberty to tailor the logo with their own colors.

This is an appropriate approach to have in an organisation that is an international federation of member countries and member groups.

Foundation number 2:

Servas now has a website with modern looks and functionalities on the internet domain servas.org. We already know that this website attract many new prospective members and that it plays a role as a communication tool existing members who are looking for useful information, for example updates about Servas work inside the United Nations system and upcoming events.

Please take some time to go to servas.org, surf around and explore the website.

Foundation number 3:

The ServasOnline system will in the future become the single universal system for member administration. It's a powerful system and it has the potential to simplify many of the hassles that are connected with having individual member administration systems in each Servas country.

Foundation number 4:

Since 2013 Servas has an established public international vision and mission which gives us a clear direction and goals.

The Vision reads "Peace and understanding through travel and hosting" and the Mission reads "Building peace and understanding across cultures".

The vision and mission are used as slogans to promote our organisation and to give the world an idea about why Servas exists and what we do.

My personal view is that our vision and mission should be accompanied by a concise and well defined definition of what values Servas is built upon. What is the ethos of Servas? There's some work that needs to be done here.

Maybe there are volunteers to be found in Servas New Zealand?

Please let me know if you would like to start a working group to create a draft for Servas values, which could accompany what is already there in the preamble of the Servas International statutes.

Foundation number 5:

Servas is playing an increasingly active role in the United Nations setting. We have a strong presence via our active volunteer members at United Nations in Geneva, New York City and in Vienna.

Our presence at the United Nations EcoSoc in Geneva, where Servas International has consultative status as a non governmental organisation, is especially strong. This is important since the SI General Assembly 2015 decided that Servas should play an active role in the fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals, SDG:s,

<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/sustainabledevelopmentgoals>

that the United Nations member countries have agreed on to promote better living conditions for the peoples of the world.

There are many members of Servas who play an active role here, and the central figure is the SI Exco peace secretary Danielle Serres. Danielle has during the passed five-six years worked very decisively and successfully to create a platform for Servas in the United Nations organisation.

Please read about Servas important work in the United Nations on servas.org.

Foundation number 6:

Servas has created platforms in the social media. This means that we have a presence on Twitter, Facebook and Youtube, which is helpful in creating a sense of global community and to make the organisation more widely known.

Our challenges

I think I have convinced you that Servas has a solid foundation to stand on and to use as a platform for further development. But there are also things that we need to have, and that we need to do.

Need number 1. There must be a rapid transition from member country specific member administration systems to the ServasOnline system. In concrete terms: that all Servas members around the world need to complete their personal accounts in the ServasOnline system. This is happening, but it would be ideal if it happened with a faster pace.

Need number 2. There are currently more than 500 people who would like to apply for an individual Servas membership. These prospective new Servas members are currently waiting for an interview or informative dialog with a Servas representative.

This is a backlog and a bottle neck that needs to be handled, both on a national level and maybe also internationally by SI Exco.

One reason SI Exco and the ServasOnline Team haven't handled this backlog situation is that we have prioritised the migration of existing members from existing systems to ServasOnline.

For many years Servas has had a problem with declining membership numbers and falling revenue. We now have a growth challenge - how to handle the opportunity which is reflected in the growing interest?

Need number 3. Servas needs to be registered as an international NGO, with a domicile and an adress. This is an ongoing matter, I and personally currently cooperate formally with a law firm in Geneva, Switzerland.

Need number 4. Servas needs an electronic online payment system. This should replace our current highly impractical, manual and paper based system with physical stamps for our Letters of introduction.

Need number 5. We need a long term plan for growth & rejuvenation of Servas.

Need number 6. We should make it possible for more members to participate during our SI Conferences and General Assemblies. I hope a greater virtual participation will be possible already during the SI Conference and General Assembly 2018 in the Republic of Korea.

I personally would like to see the following growth for Servas in a Road Map to 2024:

Year 2018: 20 000 individual members

105 country groups

Year 2021:100 000 individual members

130 country groups

Year 2024:300 000 individual members

150 country groups

One important key to achieve both the goals that are established in the Servas International statues and these growth goals is that Servas activities exploits and develop in tune with modern era of global communications.

We, the members of Servas, will keep on hosting travellers, but we should develop our capacity to create conditions for meaningful meetings, both physical and virtual, that proactively and progressively aim at creating a more peaceful world.

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to present my ideas about the current status of Servas as an organisation and the stimulating challenges that we have in front of us.

I wish that you will have a fruitful and joyful continuation of your meeting in Christchurch. I hope that you're having a lot of fun.

I also would like to wish the best of luck to all of you in your future Servas travels, with your hosting and with the volunteer work that you devote to our wonderful organisation.

Best wishes from Jonny

Jonny Sågänger

President

Servas International

