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◆◆◆ Interview with Magnus Hammar, secretary general of IUT for 18 years ◆◆◆

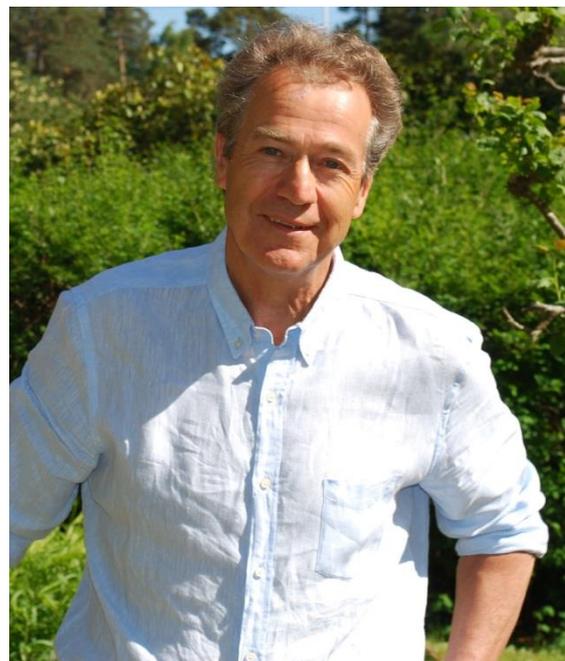
Magnus Hammar: Goodbye to a colleague with tenants at the heart

Barbara Steenbergen: Magnus, you have been working for 18 years at the IUT. In your last editorial in the "Global Tenant" you wrote you never had a boring day. Could you please tell us your most striking experiences? Which amazing things to remember?

Yes, that's true – never a dull day. Well, maybe one or two then... but I have never regretted that Monday in May 1999 when I stepped into the office on the fifth floor of the Swedish Union of Tenants, which hosted the IUT Secretariat. I've had a great job! An important and meaningful job, as secure and affordable housing is so fundamental to all human beings. And I really think that rental housing is so important in all countries, for all housing markets, so as to contribute to a mix of housing alternatives for various stages of people's housing needs.

But IUT has indeed changed a lot, since 1999. I recall my first IUT board meeting, in Paris in 1999, where I met a handful of middle-aged men. The agenda was quite short and no major decisions were taken. But I remember that there were some talks about the future of IUT. My predecessor drew up a map of the world on a white-board, and wrote with big

letters; IUT office in Africa, IUT office for Asia, IUT Latin America etc. You bet that I was impressed! What a work field! Well, IUT hasn't really developed according to those grandiose plans – but according to more realistic plans like the setting up of the IUT office in Brussels in 2008. And IUT has increased considerably, from some 35 members in 1999 to 65 members in 2017.



Magnus Hammar, Secretary General of IUT for 18 years

In the early 2000s IUT cooperated with the Olof Palme International Centre and we carried out a number of bilateral projects, in Central and Eastern Europe, and also in Africa, in order to develop tenants and residents associations.

We had a couple of African ‘adventures’ which didn’t end up all that well. In 2002 IUT had a week-long conference in Kampala, Uganda, organised by UNTU, Uganda National Tenant Association. The purpose was to organise women in the housing estates in and around Kampala. Everything went fine, until I was presented with a pile of invoices for which UNTU wanted to be reimbursed. After a closer look overnight, by one of our African colleagues, it was disclosed that these invoices were costs in connection with a personal political campaign for a city councillor that our project coordinator had been running prior to our arrival. And much of the project funding had gone the same route!

In Arusha, Tanzania, IUT had another week-long conference together with the tenant unions from Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya. The meeting was successful, we thought, and on Friday all delegates boarded their buses which were going to take them back to their home cities. I and Elisabet Lönngrén, the then IUT President, were just about to leave the hotel by taxi for the small airport in Arusha, when the hotel manager came running after us - with a number of unpaid bills in his hand. Bills for various cocktails, dinners and car hires, which had happened before our arrival to Arusha and were of course not costs agreed beforehand. I looked at the bills, shook my head and ushered Elisabeth into the taxi, and off we went. Well back in Stockholm, after about a week, I received a fax from the hotel manager, saying that IUT’s liaison person in

Arusha had been detained by the police and put in prison, because of the unpaid bills. After some negotiations, we agreed to settle the debts, by IUT paying half the costs of the unpaid bills – and our liaison person was released. After that, we’ve had no more African adventures.

You ask about amazing people. Yes, I have indeed met a lot of amazing people, especially people in various tenant associations. Many highly engaged employees who work nine to five, or often more, for established tenant organisations with a regular salary, but also many who work voluntary, without any salary, and often after their regular work hours. These are the men and women who spend their time and energy defending the rights of tenants and residents with very limited means. These are really amazing and admirable people, and my heroes.

I come to think of the young people who set up the Dublin Tenant Association, the activists in the Crown Heights Tenants Union in New York, Dr. Sayed Iqbal Mohamed in the Organisation of Civic Rights in South Africa and our devoted colleagues in the Polish Association of Tenants in Krakow, and many more.



IUT congress delegation in Krakow, Poland

IUT is indeed international work. How many countries did you visit and in which countries do you see the most urgent necessity to engage for tenant's rights?

Hard to say how many countries I have visited, but I have indeed visited many countries and cities – this has been an important part of my job. I wouldn't have been able to do my job properly without personally meeting with our IUT members, and visiting tenants around the world in their housing estates. My credibility as Secretary General has been very much dependant on my knowledge about housing policies world-wide, and my ability to speak up for tenants and their rights in their home countries. Much of this knowledge can of course be obtained from home, but it's also necessary to get a first-hand impression on the spot.

To experience the standard of rented homes and meet with tenants, people at city housing departments, etc. If we speak about the western world, developed countries, I would say that IUT's involvement and lobbying are urgently needed in the UK, Ireland, Australia and the US. These countries have one thing in common; very short – only around two months' – notices for tenants in the privately rented sector, with 6-12 months' leases. I mean, who would voluntarily remain as a tenant under these circumstances! In general, tenants in the private rental sector are much more vulnerable compared with tenants who rent from the local council, municipality or state.



Magnus giving an interview to the Polish media, Krakow

IUT is a big organisation when it comes to members, but a small one when it comes to staff. Where and how is it feasible – manpower wise- to engage more?

Yes, this is the reality and we've often discussed how IUT could more engage our members.

If you ask me, I think that we have to be realistic. Our members are indeed ready to provide manpower – when the issue concerns their own country and their national tenants.

There has to be some sort of win-win. Most of our members have quite limited resources, staff- and moneywise. What IUT can offer is often only IUT's good name, our experience and knowledge together with some limited funding for travel expenditures, hire of conference facilities etc. Of course, IUT's members with more financial muscle and staff resources could and should contribute – on the grounds of solidarity – to IUT's work on a more regular basis, on issues where they have expertise.

Seven IUT congresses- countless international conferences: please tell us about the highlights you remember most.

Yes, I did six congresses, and they have all stayed in my mind. The first one was in Amsterdam in 2001, and I was quite fresh myself, not really knowing what was expected from me, and how an IUT congress should be set up. But thanks to the Dutch Woonbond I managed to pull it through. In 2004 the IUT congress was held in Birmingham, hosted by TPAS England. The Nigerian Tenants Union was represented by a King! HRH Dr King Eke, who not only distributed a book about himself titled “The Living Legend”, but who also asked me to set up a meeting with his British royal ‘colleague’, Queen Elizabeth!



Magnus speaking at the IUT conference at the World Urban Forum, Naples, Italy 2012

I have been on international conferences sitting on panels together with many ministers responsible for housing. Somewhat scary the first couple of years, worrying that I wouldn't have enough knowledge about the issues discussed. But after four, five, years,

when my own general knowledge on housing and rental housing issues had grown, I began to relax more and feel more secure. Then after nine, ten, years I often felt more like an expert, particularly when I found out that the ministers' knowledge was often quite shallow. But don't get me wrong; there is a never ending learning process when it comes to housing. There are 196 countries in the world, all with their own housing history and policies.

Good times-bad times: What were the most striking backlashes for the tenants and the IUT?

A concrete set back was when hundreds of thousands of so called sitting tenants, in Central and Eastern Europe, lost their cases in various courts, including the Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, in their struggle for compensation when their rental flats, which they had renovated and cared for, for 20,30, or even for 50 years, underwent restitution. Meaning, the flats to which they were allocated by the communist regimes between 1945 and 1991, were handed over to the private owners, whose families had owned them before WWII. Many of these tenants, often elderly people, now have landlords who don't even live in the country, or are burdened with very high market rents. If they cannot pay, then they are threatened with eviction.

Which major structural and political changes happened in the 18 years of your mandate? What was the difference IUT could make?

There have been notable changes in many governments' housing policies when it comes to views of the government's roles and responsibilities in supplying affordable housing for its citizens. Twenty years ago government representatives often spoke about the importance of the

state's responsibility to cater for affordable and sound housing. Today, many governments seem to have shuffled this responsibility over to the market. And the market caught on, and said "just de-regulate the housing market, let us have market rents -and then we will build enough homes!"

I say "Don't believe the market – the market is never, will never be, interested in building affordable homes for the low income households". And I doubt if the construction industry is even interested in the middle classes – simply because the most profits are in construction for the upper 20% of the population, income wise. IUT should of course never lose a chance to point this out. Governments should be encouraged to provide incentives, like subsidies, aimed at housing for low- and medium-income households. Also, the various tax incentives for already rich homeowners that exist today in many countries should be phased out.

If you had the chance, what would you do differently?

Differently... hard to say. One becomes slightly blind after 18 years! And to often play solo has perhaps been the hardest thing to cope with. I don't know if I've been on the right track, or not. Even though I have had have a very active President and Board for the last say six years, this hasn't always been the case. The first ten years I was pretty much left to myself to organise IUT's work and to prioritize. This I would have liked to have done differently – if I'd had the chance and the possibility.

What would you recommend to your successor?

To perhaps always try to keep in mind that many of IUT's members are quite small

organisations, consisting of devoted men and women who are often not paid any regular salary, and who do their work for other tenants on a voluntary basis. And try to remember this when they perhaps do not answer e-mails right away, or send in reports etc.

Also, IUT consists of people from over 60 countries and regions, with various culture differences and backgrounds. So it has been necessary for me to often think out of my Swedish mental box. For example, if we've said that a meeting, a conference, starts at 09.30 h, and by that time perhaps only 50% of the participants have arrived. Or lunches, or debates, that have carried on way too long, and I've been biting my nails. And perhaps remember that when a topic has been raised, on a meeting, which hasn't always been of great interest to me or to several other participants, that this topic has in fact been of importance for this delegate representing his/her organisation and country.

This has sometimes been frustrating and difficult for me to cope with, but working with people from many cultures has also been very rewarding in the long run.



IUT board meeting Brussels, April 2017, with Magnus in the centre

Please tell us about your next plans – what will you do in the future?

The future...! Yes, I've thought about it, quite a lot. It's strange, but this is the first time in almost 60 years when I don't really know what I will be doing in, say, 6 months. Since I was six years old, I've known pretty much about the future; school, more school, family, kids, work, vacation, etc. So this is a totally new scene for me. Yes, I do have my lovely two boys, Simon (24) and Fredrik (22) to care about, and also a grandchild, little Jack, one year old. But I will not bother them, too often.

I will probably keep on travelling. Guess it's in my blood nowadays! I am really happy about the fact that many of my IUT contacts have become my dear personal friends. So I will stay in touch with many of them, and hopefully visit them too. And I've started my own "business" ShowMeStockholm. It might sound like a cliché, but I really enjoy meeting people, particularly from other countries, and to show them Stockholm.



Stockholm old town and harbour view with the three-master Af Chapman



Stockholm, historic city centre and archipelago in close proximity

My own favourite places in, and around, Stockholm that are not in the regular guide books and not always easy to find for newcomers, and who enjoy walking! Please visit www.showmestockholm.se.

So, when you are in Stockholm next time, I would love to meet up, and take you on one of my walks - pro bono of course! Luckily I don't have to pay my rent with this income!

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Interview by Barbara Steenbergen

Head of the IUT liaison office to the European Union

