

In this issue:

From the Editors

By Luis Maria Palma and Andreas Lienhard
..... 1

Towards Leadership: The Emergence of Contemporary Court Administration in Australia

By Richard Foster
..... 4

Judiciary in Times of Scarcity: Retrenchment and Reform

By Frans van Dijk, Horatius Dumbrava
..... 15

Trial by Tweet? Social Media Innovation or Degradation? The Future and Challenge of Change for Courts

By Pamela Schulz, Andrew Cannon
..... 25

European Anti-Corruption Measures in Romania

By Anne Johnson and Bianca Radu
..... 34

Minding the Court: Enhancing the Decision-Making Process

By Pamela Casey, Kevin Burke and Steve Leben
..... 45

21 Judicial Cost Saving Measures

By Jessica Vapnek
..... 55

Systemic or Incremental Path of Reform? The Modernization of Judicial System in Italy

By Giancarlo Vecchi
..... 64

Book review: Livingstone Armytage, 'Reforming Justice'

By Sandra Taal
..... 88

From the Executive Editor:

By Markus Zimmer



As civilization tentatively embarks on a new year, governments in many regions of the world report continuing adverse fallout from the global economic malaise. Their legislative leaders struggle to escape recession indicators that mark declines in commerce, growing unemployment, shrinking productivity, diminished public revenue and, for many citizens, deterioration in the quality of life. We in the justice community as elsewhere tend to presume that such deterioration is evenly distributed among populations irrespective of gender and age. Research indicates otherwise.

World Bank-sponsored research in a report issued in September 2007 reported that a 1% drop in economic productivity disproportionately increases infant mortality by 7.4 deaths per 1,000 girls versus 1.5 deaths for boys when the statistics for 59 countries in the developing world were averaged. In all likelihood, the impact of the more recent global economic downturn has exacerbated these outcomes. For girls who survive, other damaging impediments lurk in their future; as of 2012, UNESCO reported 39 million girls aged 11-15 out of school. As they reach their adolescent years, their presumptive right to learning is subordinated to their entry into domestic and reproductive roles with little or no opportunity to catch-up in later years. These gender-based tracks essentially eclipse aspirations in the international development community to achieve social justice and gender equality. The loss in potential is staggering. Gender-oriented progress reports in modern societies, where educational opportunity for adolescent girls takes precedence over traditional domestic and reproductive roles, clearly demonstrate their capacity to excel academically and professionally in virtually all disciplines, including law and justice. The barrier is opportunity, not capacity or intellect.

As we collectively embark on pursuing IACA's vision of improving how court systems are governed, managed and administered, I urge my male colleagues to consider, acknowledge and take into account the enormous forfeiture of potential in the developing world as a consequence of these skewed priorities and to creatively inquire what we might do to influence and adjust them, directly or indirectly, in our professional and personal lives. These souls represent our grandmothers, our mothers, our sisters, our spouses, our daughters, our granddaughters -- those who nurtured and sustained us when we were helpless and vulnerable on either end of the age spectrum.

Courts exercise a critical role in achieving the ends of meaningful social justice. In our roles as judges, executives, managers, administrators, and other professionals, we can and should support efforts to provoke cognizance of the disproportionately adverse gender-based impact of economic downturns and the loss of capacity and contribution that result from it. And to the extent that our courts, as institutions, can diminish those losses, I respectfully suggest that we target them.

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