Rethinking the transformative role of the social work profession in Albania: Some lessons learned from the response to COVID-19

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Abstract
We provide an overview of the social work response to COVID-19 in Albania. After introducing the country situation, we discuss social workers’ engagement in governmental and non-governmental agencies and provide suggestions for advancing the social work profession. We call for greater engagement of social workers in political spaces.

Keywords
Albania, COVID-19 pandemic, social development, social protection, social work

Background
Albania was the first country in the Western Balkans to enforce a lockdown (Dyrmishi, 2020). Lockdown measures – introduced on 9 March – changed invariably. Initially, the government banned movements after 6 p.m. In a matter of days, heavier restrictions were introduced: movements were allowed within a limited number of hours after a temporary permit was obtained from...
the government. Heavy fines were applied in cases of violations (Dyrmishi, 2020). By 21 May, the reported number of infected people was 969 and the number of deaths 31 (in a population of 2,877,797) (Open Data, 2020).

The pandemic magnified the problem of poor governance. In the last few years, the quality of governance (e.g. transparency, control of corruption) has worsened (Freedom House, 2018; Transparency International, 2019; Vrugtman and Bino, 2020). The prime minister orchestrated the response to the pandemic, often through online communication with the public (Bino, 2020; Dyrmishi, 2020). As lockdown measures were enforced, media control increased (Maksimović, 2020). Journalists who questioned the measures taken by the government were accused of ‘spreading panic in a time of war’ (Bino, 2020, para. 10). Civil society organizations have criticized the government for making closed-door decisions and taking arbitrary measures, and they have called for greater transparency and accountability (Bogdani, 2020a)

**Social workers’ engagement in governmental and non-governmental agencies**

The elderly, persons with disabilities, Roma, Egyptians, the homeless, and people working in the informal sector were hit the hardest by the pandemic (Gilaj and Ballhysa, 2020; Hekurani and Gjerani, 2020; Sinoruka, 2020). To respond to the situation, the government introduced a special program – in-home assistance – on 19 March (Council of Ministers, Decision no. 236). The program consisted of delivering the monthly payments of the beneficiaries of social welfare programs and the elderly at home. Assistance was also offered with food and non-food items (e.g. hygiene supplies) and medicine. The program targeted five groups: the beneficiaries of social welfare programs, persons with disabilities, the elderly, the homeless, and families that lost their homes due to the earthquake of November 2019. The criteria used to select beneficiaries within these five large groups, however, were not announced. Besides the decision of the Council of Ministers – which specified the five groups that could benefit from the in-home assistance program – no other information was provided. Based on our observation, municipalities, even the largest one – the municipality of Tirana, did not communicate any information on the selection criteria.

Municipalities compiled lists of potential beneficiaries which were sent for verification to the Central Commission for Assistance Provision in the capital. In each municipality, a Commission of Civil Protection was established with the goal of delivering assistance to beneficiaries (Council of Ministers, Decision no. 236). Social workers – together with other municipal staff and volunteers – were part of the Commission of Civil Protection. Social workers have played an important role, first, in identifying potential beneficiaries, and second, in delivering assistance. Social workers in municipalities were already – before the pandemic – involved with disadvantaged groups as they typically serve in municipal departments where they deliver services to beneficiaries of social welfare programs, persons with disabilities, victims of domestic violence, and children at risk of abuse, neglect, or trafficking. Social workers drew on their community experience to compile the list of potential beneficiaries, which was sent to the Central Commission for Assistance Provision. Furthermore, they delivered food and non-food items, as well as medicines, to individuals and families in need.

While the in-home assistance program has been instrumental in addressing the immediate needs of groups that were affected the most by the pandemic, it was not adequate. Hundreds of poor families that relied on the informal market for their livelihoods did not qualify as beneficiaries and thus were not included in the program (Bogdani, 2020b; Ndrevataj, 2020). Anger and protests sprung from groups such as Roma and Egyptians that were excluded from the in-home assistance program.
and lived on the brink of poverty (Taylor, 2020). Further, the targeting of families that were entitled to in-home assistance was poor. Complaints loomed in the media, describing the elderly and persons with disabilities being left out of the in-home assistance program or not receiving the assistance they needed (Gilaj and Ballhysa, 2020). The pandemic magnified existing problems, revealing, among others, the inadequacy of the social protection system. The in-home assistance program could not address the complex situation that emerged during the pandemic. Other types of programs and services were needed, such as online support for victims of domestic violence, online therapy for persons with disabilities, emotional support for lonely seniors, and financial support for families that could not afford homeschooling costs. These types of services were mainly provided by non-governmental agencies. However, their provision, as we discuss below, faced challenges as well.

During the pandemic, non-governmental agencies shifted the provision of services online. Social workers involved in non-governmental agencies have offered online support to persons with disabilities, counseling services to victims of domestic violence, and online classes to children in disadvantaged communities, among others. Social workers have also engaged in online platforms established to support individuals and families during the pandemic. Online platforms such as Better Together were established by civil society organizations and human rights activists to provide information on how to address concerns over health and mental health during the pandemic. Meanwhile, existing platforms such as the Child Protection Hub of Terre des hommes (2020) and Porta Vendore [Local Gateway] (2020) tailored their services to address the needs that emerged during the pandemic. For instance, Porta Vendore provided information on the legislation enacted during the pandemic and invited citizens to report the challenges they faced. The Child Protection Hub organized a series of webinars on working with children and families during the pandemic. Numerous challenges have emerged with the provision of online services. Access to online services has been restricted only to a minority who could afford it. Families have faced difficulties in meeting Internet costs, let alone in accessing expensive equipment (World Vision, 2020).

For social workers, the coordination of online services became a challenge, especially in large, interdisciplinary teams. Often, they lacked protocols to guide their work. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection issued protocols several weeks after the lockdown (Orders no. 254 and 290). Social workers also struggled with addressing ethical issues during the provision of online services. Reports from the field revealed that social workers faced difficulties obtaining permits to leave the house and they have even been interrogated by police officers when traveling to support victims of domestic violence. Social workers have raised the concern that, compared to other essential workers, they have had lower access to safety supplies.

A critical view of the role of social workers during the pandemic

The role of social workers during the pandemic has been mainly limited to providing emergency services. To our knowledge, social workers have not been part of public debates or policy discussions addressing the effects of the pandemic. The Technical Committee of Experts – an ad hoc body established by the Ministry of Health and Social Protection to advise the government during the pandemic – had public health experts (Dyrmishi, 2020) and political actors. Social workers have not engaged in policy debates, proposing new policy alternatives to address the short- and long-term impact of the pandemic. Even though citizens’ protests have made it clear that some of the most disadvantaged groups were excluded from the in-home assistance program, social workers have not organized or engaged in policy advocacy – calling for greater responsiveness from the government. A concern of social workers serving in government agencies is that criticizing programs such as the in-home assistance program may cost them their job. As a result, they remain
silent. But unfortunately, silence has been pervasive among others – those involved in non-governmental agencies – as well. Further, the pandemic has revealed that social workers are not well prepared to respond to crises. While the profession was established more than two decades ago and a lot has been achieved since then (Dhëmbo et al., 2019), it is clear that strengthening the profession requires much more organized efforts.

Suggestions for advancing the social work profession in Albania

We suggest that schools of social work and the Association of Social Workers in Albania initiate a broad, open discussion on what the profession should look like in the future. What kind of change and values is the social work profession currently promoting? Where does the profession stand in relation to development challenges, especially the rise of authoritarianism? What should the profession look like after the pandemic? What kind of transformation should social workers aspire to achieve and how? These discussions can lead to the development of a national social work agenda that is informed by the challenges – local and global (Truell, 2020a) – that social work professionals are currently facing.

The examination of the social work response to COVID-19 in Albania suggests that social workers, despite the context, share some common challenges in times of pandemics such as COVID-19. The groups that social workers serve are affected the most, and social workers struggle to provide adequate services. While social workers have drawn on their shared principles and strengths to respond to local circumstances during the pandemic (Truell, 2020b), it is important that social workers engage more systematically in political spaces where decisions about social policies and programs are made. The emphasis on solidarity, transformation, and social change needs to be better reflected in social work interventions, especially at the macro level. A greater engagement in political spaces is critical, especially in post-authoritarian contexts such as Albania where there is an increasing concern that political decision-making is becoming increasingly centralized, and citizens’ voices fall on deaf ears (Vrugtman and Bino, 2020).

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