

Dynamo International: policy statement on COVID-19

Dynamo International calls for **social street work** around the world to be recognised as an **essential service** not only **during** but also **beyond** the **crisis period**. Social street work is essential to securing a society based on **well-being and solidarity**.

We acknowledge that many building-based services need to close at this time, as they constitute high-risk environments for contracting COVID-19, and the importance of the ‘stay at home’ message. This makes work that takes place in other settings – especially the street – even more important, as this work supports those who find it difficult or are unable to access services through other means.

It is our responsibility to draw attention to the fact that many of the people we work with have no home to go to or are at risk of abuse or other harm in their homes. There is no doubt that some are safer on the street than at home.

Social street workers are, like others, skilled and experienced educators; but their unique contribution is an absolute commitment to ‘Low Threshold’ practice: they work in spaces and places and at times of the day that many services cannot or will not.

Social street workers do not intend to encourage people onto the street or disregard guidance on social distancing. Far from it: we want people to go home – where it is safe to do so. But the social street work ethic is to make visible that which is often invisible, to draw attention to needs and problems that are hidden, and to work to address them.

Social street workers provide support in a range of contexts where poverty, ill-health, addiction and violence are daily realities. COVID-19 amplifies these issues. This is particularly so in the poorest countries, where populations in street situations are the worst affected. For many, the means to earn even a small income and/or access support simply no longer exist.

“Life ‘before’ the virus was already very complicated, now it’s a nightmare. When you are hungry, when you no longer know how to feed your children, your loved ones, paying attention to hygiene, taking health precautions, become secondary concerns.”

Jean Cristophe Ryckmans, Nepal.

Our experience also teaches us that many of the messages relayed by governments are not being heeded. Sometimes this is due to a lack of understanding. Sometimes it’s because there is a good deal of misinformation about COVID-19.

“All over, there is a lot of ‘fake news’ on the street: ‘speed kills the virus’, ‘you have to drink vinegar’, ‘migrants spread the disease’ etc. The challenge is to help inform people about the truth, and effective prevention measures.”

Cis Dewaele, Flanders – Belgium.

Social street workers know the people most at risk, and they know where to find them. Responding to needs, as determined by the people themselves, makes social street workers trusted and able to empower communities to take action. **It is essential therefore that work takes place in the street and in communities to help people learn how best to protect themselves and others. In sum, social street workers play a crucial and effective role in supporting those people excluded from the system, especially in this moment of crisis.**

While social street workers are responsive to what’s happening and **continue to work on the front line**, they have limited and often diminishing capacity; the organisations and associations they work for are struggling to survive.

*“In **Romania**, many street work organisations exist on the basis of financial contributions from businesses. Given the economic impact of COVID-19, many of these companies have stopped their support, with obvious consequences for workers’ ability to provide services – just when demand and operating costs are rising. Workers fear their*

organisations will become untenable; many associations have had to lay off workers. Some have continued to work on an individual, voluntary, basis despite this. Those that remain have moved to minimum salaries and part-time work, abandoning generic work and focusing instead on getting supplies to infants, food and some welfare facilities to those in need.”

Ionut Jugureanu, Romania.

New and increased resources are urgently needed to support social street work. We call on all authorities to recognise this crucial role, **to grant them a specific and official status, and to support and protect them in this most essential work.**

There are other challenges specific to social street work.

Globally, **we call on all governments not to criminalise those living in the street or those for whom it is a place of safety.** In some countries, the obligation of confinement results in an increasingly strong repression against more vulnerable populations who do not have the luxury of being confined in good conditions. **Protecting society from COVID-19 cannot be at the expense of human rights.**

“In Guatemala, because of martial law, they seem to have forgotten about the population of the street. Rather than imprisoning people, they beat them. Street work, though prohibited, continues, with the aim of trying to move people to places where they won't be punished.”

Gabriela Altman, Guatemala.

Social street workers across the world are united in their concern about the security excesses of some governments, which authorities argue are necessary in the fight against the spread of COVID-19. They are also worried about the decisions these governments might take after this crisis in relation to the most excluded populations.

The countries that seem best to resist the consequences of the pandemic are those that had an **anticipatory and preventive vision of public management** by having **quality health systems open to all and strong mechanisms for social protection.**

This teaches us to think about the future.

We all need to learn from this unprecedented experience, especially about the value of this preventive approach, which favours the well-being of all society – not just those most vulnerable.

We call on authorities not to use the exit from confinement to decrease social care, health service or education on the pretext of economic recovery. This crisis has unveiled the limits of that equation.

In an important way the Covid-19 pandemic is an opportunity: it shows that states are capable of taking radical measures to respond to health emergencies. This awareness can be beneficial in the face of other crises – environmental, economic, social, and democratic. We should never forget that this is possible only if it is built from the perspective of international solidarity.

Dynamo International – Street Workers Network comprises 51 national platforms from Southern and Northern countries. The network supports street work in each country to generate international solidarity between key stakeholders and to promote equality, social justice, empowerment and human rights for **people in street situations**. We will continue to collect and analyze the effects of public policies on the most vulnerable populations and to mobilize social street workers, the people concerned and the authorities to strengthen this solidarity.