

Chapter 25

Social Work During COVID–19 and the Role of Local Governments in Managing the Crisis of the Pandemic: Case of Istanbul

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ABSTRACT

The world has been passing through extremely hard times since the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in January 2020. Vulnerabilities of disadvantaged groups such as the elderly, women, children, migrants, people with disabilities and people living below poverty line have increased significantly during the pandemic, which has triggered global economic crisis. Unemployment surged tremendously, which affected especially workers in the informal economy who are not covered by social insurance. After the closures of schools, the inequality among children in education has been more divisive and deeper. Domestic violence and child abuse cases have been on rise during the national lockdowns, and the burden on the social work organisations has increased enormously. Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM), the in-depth case study of this research, is among the local governments, which have intensified the social services for the vulnerable groups. In this chapter, the social services of IMM during the pandemic are analysed through the perspective of social work, and some policy recommendations are presented.

INTRODUCTION

Social work, like many disciplines, exist for the well-being of individuals, groups and communities in the broad sense, and for the disadvantaged people in the narrow sense. Contrary to many other fields, social work does not focus on one specific area, and it is applied at many settings, from schools to hospitals, from juvenile justice to the elderly care, at micro, meso and macro levels. Therefore, as an

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interdisciplinary field, it is in close relation with statutory and non-statutory organisations, that aim the well-being of individuals and society. There is always need for social work; however, at trying times, as we have experienced during the unprecedented global pandemic of Covid-19, need for social work surges tremendously. The global Covid-19 death toll has already passed more than 1.6 million as of December 2020, and it is expected that the pandemic will push more than 150 million extreme poor into poverty (COVID-19 to Add as Many as 150 Million Extreme Poor by 2021, 2020). During this hard period, the burden on the social work organisations has increased enormously, which necessitates collaboration among different stakeholders, and more contribution from public agencies to alleviate the overwhelming effects of the pandemic, especially on the disadvantaged groups.

Local governments, all around the world, already carry out some works that can be classified under the category of social work. As statutory bodies closest to the people, they can ensure service provision in a more effective and efficient way since they are well aware of the needs and demands of service users. Some of the local governments do that through their social work departments, or other departments as a mandatory task assigned by the relevant legislation. In countries like Turkey, works regarding social work are mainly conducted by central government agencies. Local governments voluntarily provide social services as they observe that the supply generated by the central government and tertiary sector is far from meeting the needs of the local residents. At times like the Covid-19 pandemic, when thousands of people pass away and hundreds of thousands of people experience severe material deprivation, the gap between supply and demand deepens, and local governments feel urged to act more actively in the field of social work. Realizing the severity of the situation, most local governments have allocated more fund for social work activities, which are both preventive and restorative. Some of them have adopted innovative methods of tackling the social problems encountered during the pandemic, such as helplines for the victims of domestic violence, donation web-sites, and anti-stress campaigns, which are done through social media channels.

Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM) is among the local governments, which have introduced additional services during the pandemic, especially for the disadvantaged groups, which are highly related to social work. Turkey is among the countries in the World with the highest number of infected cases, and Istanbul with a population of 16 million is the largest and the most affected city in Turkey. This gigantic city, bigger than 130 countries in the world, had already challenging social issues due to unemployment, low-income and unplanned migration from both other cities in Turkey and abroad, which have been exacerbated during the pandemic period. The central government agencies, as well as voluntary organisations, despite their intense work, are unable to meet the expectations of the disadvantaged groups as the need for social work is increasing vastly day by day. Thus, as it is the case in other cities in Turkey, the local authority of Istanbul emerges as a significant actor in the provision of social services. It has introduced some innovative services such as matching people who cannot afford to pay their bills with those who are willing to cover these bills, as a response to the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic. This chapter will start by discussing the challenges that social work organisations face during the Covid-19 process, and the contribution of local governments to the achievement of social work goals in cities. After setting this context, the social services provided by IMM, especially during the time of the pandemic, will be analysed in terms of some principles of the social work discipline.

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