

# Social professionals in corona weeks

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Social workers are engaged in doing community building. From the very beginning in 1926 (start Stichting Opbouw Drenthe). It is called community building from the late 1950s. And building in society is a separate chapter in these days of corona. Social workers are the professional specialists of social living together, just as car mechanics know everything about car engines. And suddenly, in mid-March 2020, that way of building livings together gets a crisis and a huge sweep at the same time. Social workers already knew the creativity and vitality of society, but were just as surprised. What at first sight seemed like a summer jeux de boules club, or a diamond painting club, or the Monday coffee chat in the neighborhood room turned into the country's most vital care machine in 2x 24 hours. New ideas. New networks. New frontrunners and leaders in streets and neighborhoods. There are quite a few things that change in corona times. Solutions, procedures, habits are all interpreted differently from the business as usual approach. Unusual is not the norm, but it is a successful strategy.

From the perspective of community development, three things really stand out:

## **1) Professional Care commitment**

The enormous effort of the healthcare professionals. Not only in hospitals, but also community nurses, home care workers in neighborhoods, general practitioners and care collectives in neighborhoods and villages,

## **2) Civil stake**

Neighborhoods and villages are bursting with initiatives. From neighborly care, from attention to each other, from "belonging", from creativity, from practical help, from new relationships, from symbols / rituals in the making, from new frontrunners /leaders in communities. And attention to misfits, for people who are no longer so visible.

But also sharper problems come into the picture: what about lonely citizens we don't know? What about people who depend on the food bank, but don't know if they can still go there? Or people who cannot or dare not come out?

Another point is that citizens are asked to adapt their individual behavior to the greater interest of society. So subordinate their own preferences to the public interest.

## **3) Professional commitment**

Professionals in community development, especially social workers, are on the move after a short lockdown ("what can and especially what should we do?"). They call well-known active residents, stimulate new networks in the neighborhood, have never used online tools so often, take to the streets and always 1.5 meters in between.

## Three times three

Social workers have a thing for triangles.

The first is the totality of professional drive support. That concerns three things. First: problem solving, second: awareness (how is this topic structured and how has it been addressed?), Third: structural change. Community work has a reform mission, so also the third question: how can we make structural changes? Simplification: repair tire, -> why do I always have holes in my tires and how did I repair it, -> different tires, different driving behavior, different transport.

Second, social workers always ask themselves these three questions in this order:

- what can residents and communities do for themselves,
- what can residents and communities do with the help of others,
- what can others do for residents and communities.

And then as third, another three, citizen roles: is the resident a citizen, a customer, a victim?

Translated into actions: should the resident get space and support, get an answer to his question, or

be saved? All three roles matter. Especially in crisis situations. As a victim, his tire is repaired for the citizen, as a citizen he himself will make structural changes in the community. The difference between closing gaps or strengthening social fabric. Between service and community building. Between dependence and self-management.

## Inside or outside

The corona crisis makes the policy term 'social base' visible in one fell swoop. Mutual help, close interest, practical help, digital innovation. Right through existing social dividing lines. Heartwarming.

But it started with almost all social work institutions putting the same text on the website: *This means that all activities, meetings, consultation hours and services (including 1-on-1 services, home visits, etc.) of our organization are suspended. The locations will also remain closed until then. The professionals will work from home as much as possible. Every morning we can be reached by phone from 8:30 am to 12:00 pm. Our advice is to ask us questions by email as much as possible*

A defensive response aimed at health regulations and monitoring the safety of employees and visitors. And not focused on the smart search for new opportunities to do work in streets and neighborhoods. Apart from the company announcements, workers nevertheless went into the neighborhoods. Always at 1.5 meters, but looking for contact with citizens. The resident who simply walks on the street, the active volunteer, the community group or the homeless person who always camps behind the garage box.

This is what Aristotle calls practical wisdom. The wisdom that is not outside the professional, which is stored in people and develops through experiences and associated insights. It combines smart acting, appropriate solutions, responding to the environment and it is connected to seeing, hearing and feeling.

Social workers became somewhat rebellious, played with the restrictions of their managements, and came up with well-suited own work solutions. They changed from employees of welfare organizations to a professional. The corona crisis created an unpredictable environment, and then you see social workers gleaming. Then there is little use of evidence-based products and generalities. Then you have to judge the situation, choose position and trust your experience. That requires practical wisdom.

According to Aristotle, practical wisdom stems from "the practice of a craft. Through love and attention to the profession, professionals make wise choices, instead of blindly following the rules."

## How do social workers do what they do?

Can, and especially dare, we look with community workers eyes at the existing dynamics in neighborhoods and villages. To all those people who wave on rooftops or sing on balconies to support the health care professionals, restaurants that give free food to the unemployed and volunteers who give food to people who cannot get out of their homes. Suddenly everyone seems to be nice. We are happy and surprised about so much social connection.

What about the use of social work? What do community workers participate in and in what way?

We can add those triangles and ask ourselves some professional, reflective questions, for example: are citizens now residents or victims, is the community in the lead or is the social work organizing the performance at the nursing home? Do we make communities stronger or do we organize additional services?

Maybe this schedule will help. Suppose that as a social worker you have to test your corona bet on these eight points. And put it on a sliding scale as if it were a mixer. Where will your arrow be?

What do community workers do during social activities during corona?	
Social work has direction	Citizens of village/neighborhood started and they are in control
Organize help platform (supply and demand)	Invite existing connections "to action"
Help	Provide Relationships
Social lockdown	Social proximity
For people in need	With-or better By- community
Provide solutions	Share stories and share experiences of citizens
Organize coherence and coordination	Organize, step by step, and grow in a natural way
Focused on project-based expansion (= size)	Small diversity side by side (= mass)
Supporting volunteering	Support Neighbors and support their care and initiatives

On the left is crazy good work, help as it is meant to be. Because people this period depend on outside help. We need to be kind. Social helping.

But realize that the approach also creates dependence. It contributes very little to stronger neighborhoods, to emancipation, collectivization, talent development or inclusion. The social fabric does not become more resilient. The right side is working on community building. And ensures that the dependence is also there, but is and remains mainly in the community. Internal dependence. And it means that all the fantastic social commitment of people can develop not only during the crisis period, but also in the period after that. Because it has become -become- a part of the community. Maybe it will look different. But the spontaneous band can also perform at the neighborhood party, the flower man who gives away tulips gets a place on the neighborhood market, and the people who bake cakes for residents give "The great neighborhood bake off" workshops in the community center.

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Deventer, March 31. Two weeks lockdown.

The Netherlands