

Urban spaces in the time of Covid-19

Analysis of values, lived experience, and power

The current Covid-19 epidemic exacerbates socially unjust infrastructures and makes visible a power imbalance having an unequal effect on society's most vulnerable. Social services professionals need to look at the broader urban context in order to understand how this affects wellbeing. The Urban SOS project is developing a framework through which practitioners can view complex issues in the urban context.

In this article we give a social interactions perspective on the current Covid-19 pandemic, with a focus on social services in the urban context.

Social services are facing a new reality

Covid-19 spread rapidly as a result of globalization, high levels of mobility due to business and travel and a level of unpreparedness which few were willing to acknowledge prior to the pandemic. In this perspective, cities are intersections of social stratification. Social stratification refers to a society's categorization of its people into rankings

of socioeconomic tiers based on factors like wealth, income, race, education, and power.¹ When working with clients in this multidimensional context, social sector professionals face increasing complexities².

The pandemic makes the level of polarization in society more visible; vulnerable people are less able to protect themselves and prevent the spread of the virus than the general population. The virus is causing devastation especially among groups of people living in overcrowded urban contexts. These groups are uniquely at risk because of their susceptibility to the infection and transmission of the virus. This is due to issues such as overcrowded housing, underlying medical conditions, and differing beliefs about using healthcare services. Families with lower incomes may live in units with more people in smaller spaces and are unable to isolate.³

Social sector professionals have dealt with social problems in urban areas since the late 1800's. In this new global crisis, professionals need new tools to analyze and provide context-based solutions, which respect values and address power imbalances. Professionals interact with people daily during the pandemic, already complex workloads are increasing, working environments are changing and working methods and tools need to be updated. At the same time, clients' life situations deteriorate as the crisis deepens.⁴

Covid-19 Parade in Selected European Urban Areas

The pandemic rapidly overtaxed national healthcare and social welfare systems. In Europe the hospitals were overwhelmed by patients suffering from respiratory symptoms which swiftly became life-threatening when the medical equipment to treat the illness was not available. As governments tried to contain the spread of infection, calls for quarantine and business closures were implemented. As this continued, the economic pressure began to take a toll on social welfare systems. In this section we look at examples of the response to the pandemic in a few European nations in order to place Finland's situation in context.

Both Italy and the UK responded in creative and flexible ways, such as teleworking and adding digital tools to traditional face-to-face work yet their numbers rose. In Estonia state-based social services were limited

but local governments stepped in and reorganized services in collaboration with local communities and volunteers. In Sweden the response to the pandemic was exceptional as they did not have a lockdown but recommended guidelines were in place. Workers accommodated this by scheduling face-to-face and virtual work in a hybrid manner.⁵

Across countries, concerns were high for vulnerable populations such as the elderly, those with physical or mental health problems, criminal justice involved or those at greater risk for domestic violence. Lack of access to technology was another common concern. One shared difficulty for workers across Europe was the lack of personal protection equipment due to the tendency for social services being undervalued compared to healthcare. Finally, the resilience of the social and health-care structures is of concern as we look forward to what comes as a result of needing to postpone many services or interventions in order to address acute issues. One positive outcome might be that the pandemic will boost the use of community based social work which has largely disappeared in many countries with more collaboration opportunities between NGO's and civil society than previously.⁶

The Finnish Phenomenon

Covid-19 spread to Finland in March 2020 and the number of infections increased rapidly in the Uusimaa region, especially in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Schools and educational institutions were closed and 60% of all the workforce began teleworking. Gatherings of more than ten people were prohibited. Uusimaa was closed and cross-border travel was only possible with a permit, which was monitored by the police with the additional support of the Defense Forces. Existing travel bans, recommendations to avoid public transport and numerous public, private and cultural and sports services activities were cancelled.^{7 8}

A large number of people were isolated in their homes, some without any social contacts due to remote working, layoffs and restrictive measures. Prohibitions, recommendations, and guidelines were aimed at physical segregation, which reduced options for social interaction.⁹

A large number of older people were excluded when the free movement of people over the age of 70 was restricted and visits were banned due to the high risk of infection for the elderly.¹⁰

Many risk groups remained on the margins of or without services as services were transferred to remote and digital services¹¹. On the streets of Helsinki, homelessness and conditions related to mental health and intoxicants were more evident than before. In a questionnaire by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 75% of respondents estimated that loneliness and feelings of insecurity increased during April and May.¹²

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Strict restrictions effectively reduced the spread of the Covid-19 virus, resulting in one of the smallest number of cases, hospitalizations and fatalities per capita in Europe, but at the same time, the need for social services increased radically. Digital skills are part of today's civic skills and a lack of skills can be an exclusionary factor when help with this challenge can be difficult to find. It is virtually impossible to provide service and care in a situation where help, support and information locations are “closed”. As a result, during

the pandemic, social workers felt their ability to perform their duties and have a positive impact on the well-being of individuals and communities was severely narrowed.¹³

When social contacts are broken or there are very few, the effects can be seen in health and well-being experiences, the lack of contact aggravates other problems. Loneliness and deprivation go hand in hand and therefore loneliness can be viewed as a social issue.^{14 15} Older and multi-problem clients, in particular, suffer from the change in social and health services. There was surprise among social workers especially about the lack of family support for elderly persons as well as the low level of preparedness of NGOs to assist public services for older people.¹⁶

Q1: The generic and abstract concepts.

Concepts, which can be used to better understand specific local challenges, conflicts of interests and problems related to social work in the urban context for example, the concepts of power, place, space, identity and community.

Q2: The local and specific context.

Analysis is anchored in empirical questions. More specifically in examples of national/local/organizational challenges, conflicts of interests and problems such as gentrification, liberalization and marginalisation related to social vulnerability and life in urban areas.

Phronetic Analysis is used to navigate the four quadrants

Q3: The global and abstract analytical concepts/theories.

Having considered the specific examples, we now (again) return to a more abstract mode of analysis as 'critical friends of the system', where we scrutinize the ways in which the law, welfare state contexts and social policy development affect concrete local developments.

Q4: Global and specific processes.

As citizens in the urban age, we all experience larger generic processes, which are changing our cities such as gentrification, suburbanization and migration. In this framework, no city or urban area is an isolated island, and thus collective and global solutions to local problems are within reach.

Image 1: Urban SOS project's four-quadrant model for phronetically inspired analytical framework.

Values and Power in the Urban Reality

In order to better tackle the new demands, an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership was formed. Urban Social Work: Towards a trans-disciplinary, inclusive, sustainable future (Urban SOS) focuses on the development of a new framework for analysis within social work, utilizing a phronetic analysis model, as developed by Bent Flyvbjerg¹⁷. Phronetic analysis seeks to clarify values, interests, and power relations as a basis for praxis. In the project, we map and analyse intersections between urbanisation, social issues in Europe, and the lived (human) experiences. We are developing a new transnational and interactive platform and educational materials for educators, students and practitioners.^{18 19}

The goal in the project is to engage social workers working in urban communities in producing more socially just and sustainable solutions to social issues appearing in urban areas. One of the main questions we are trying to answer looks at how a theoretically and philosophically rooted approach, such as Flyvbjerg's²⁰, becomes accessible, manageable and relevant for practitioners.

In Flyvbjerg's original work, he uses four value-rational questions:

1. Where are we going?
2. Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power?
3. Is this development desirable?
4. What, if anything, should we do about it?²¹

We are developing a four-quadrant model, which can be used to guide an analysis of the ways in which local urban challenges are interconnected with national, regional, international and global processes (Image 1). The model is a tool for professionals to analytically visualize and understand the different aspects of power and values.²²

As we are facing a new urban crisis, Covid-19, we believe that this framework can also support new collaboration between disciplines supporting human well-being in the urban context. Well-being is seen as including several dimensions such as economic and financial, political and cultural, as well as physical and social well-being²³. This means that the solutions formulated and implemented by our elected officials

and our public, private and third sector actors need to take lived experiences, values and power discrepancies into account. The development of our framework introduces a new way of viewing social issues in an urban context utilizing concepts and methods from geography, sociology and economics as well as anthropology alongside social work ideals of empowerment, participation and social justice.²⁴

Analyzing our values and creating hope

We believe that social service professionals need to look at the broader urban context in order to understand how this affects well-being because we consider local urban problems to influence, and be influenced by, global problems and issues. This is not about creating more work for professionals but rather fostering a way of thinking or making the thinking more visible. Phronesis gives a practical way of thinking, it is an evaluation tool for our values as well as an attitude or way of working. But phronesis can also be seen as a tool for creating hope. Creating hope should be also in the core of social work. Social workers are presented with dilemmas and challenging situations almost daily, but change is only possible if there is hope. This applies to both individuals and communities. That is why it is important that there are individuals, professionals and movements that give hope.²⁵ We see the current situation as a space where hope is needed more than ever.

In our current situation, facing new and ever-changing challenges, teaching and training methods in the social field must be redeveloped in cooperation with social workers, clients, educational institutions and universities. Doctor of Social Sciences Anu-Riina Svenlin, writes in her blog about how the Covid-19 pandemic has already shaped and continues to require the strengthening and accessibility of social care services in the online environment²⁶. But at the same time we need to go online we also need to keep in mind, how do we still encounter people and their needs? Reciprocity is something that is in the heart of social work but we cannot lose it in our new virtually oriented times. Social work professor Maritta Törrönen²⁷ explains reciprocity as a negotiating relationship through which people pursue their perceived and external well-being. According to her, society should pay attention

to the relationships and encounters between people and communities. Through them, it is possible to promote prosperity and a caring democracy.²⁸

We claim that Finnish social work still needs to focus more on communities and their development opportunities²⁹. From our perspective, in this time of Covid-19, we need critical analytical skills and frameworks for understanding our complex urban environment. Developing new ways of working, modifying available services and challenging unjust structures and power disparities in a way that strengthens the client's skills or the community's own resources is, from our point of view, successful social work.

WRITERS

Tiina Lehto-Lundén is Doctor of Social Sciences and Licenced Social Worker. Currently she is working in Metropolia University of Applied Sciences as senior lecturer in social services. Her professional background is in child protection and disability sector. Communities as base of human wellbeing is in her focus, when also working as a project manager of the Urban SOS project.

Heli Määttänen is a Master of Social Services and has a background in social counseling, civic activities, disability work and work with the families in crisis. She has worked in public, third and private sector roles. She has been involved as a project worker of the Urban SOS project since the fall of 2019, when she turned working as a lecturer in social services at Metropolia University of Applied Sciences.

Leigh Anne Rauhala is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (FL-USA) turned Social Work Educator living in Finland. Her background is in the Mental Health sector working with severe and persistent mental disorders in the Community Health Care setting prior to moving to Finland. She has been teaching Bachelor of Social Services students since 2007. She serves as the Mobility Contact for Social Services students and is involved in several international teaching and research projects focusing on Social Work in Urban Contexts.

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