

Community Organising in the Social Distancing Era of Pandemic

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Abstract

Community organisation is one of the social work methods striving towards creating a self-reliant community built on community action promoting a collaborative and cooperative attitude facilitated by collective consciousness. COVID-19 pandemic created constraints on social work practice, especially community organisation. The pandemic affected the world irrespective of class, creed, race, and sex, and the possible remedy suggested is social distancing and social isolation. Social isolation prevents an infected person from accessing community services and communication. Social distancing is a measure that promotes community members to physical distancing and later restricts all interaction with the assistance of virtual platforms. This challenges the practice of community organisation that promotes sustainable development incorporating balanced growth of four capitals that have interplay among economy, society and environment. The practice of social distancing nurtured a distancing consciousness against the human nature of communitarian living, which demands addressing issues related to mental health, public health, economic life, and a safe environment. These challenges pave the way for community organisation's creative and constructive practice, forming a virtual community rooted in volunteerism built on an existential approach. It thus facilitates meeting the needs of individuals and communities in the distanced era, and resource mobilisation both internally and externally, and networking serves as the best tool for the same. However, this requires revisiting and re-reading the current philosophy, principles and values of community organisation and adapting new strategies where the community organiser is challenged to opt right approach that blends micro, meso and macro, which aims at collective consciousness enhancement. The key to this positioning of individuals and community is to focus on its strength, i.e., a strength-based approach, but without ignoring that the situation is the determinant of the approach.

Nevertheless, the challenge to the community organiser is to remove social isolation or social distancing barriers by enhancing the knowledge horizon of both society and profession, improving skills, understanding the suitable approaches required in the situation and thus becoming a hub as a community facilitator.

Keywords: Community Organisation, COVID'19, Social Distancing, Strength-based Approach

1. Introduction

Social work is a practising profession (IFSW, 2014) with values like service, social justice, dignity and worth of human beings, relationship, integrity and competency. If this is a practising profession, it has its own primary and secondary methods that promote and prompts the social work professional to strive for equity and justice, human rights and sustainable development. Community organisation is one of the methods of social work, a value-based practising profession, striving towards creating a self-reliant community built on community action based on a collaborative and cooperative attitude that is facilitated by collective consciousness. Socialisation agents from the childhood of human beings help in this endeavour at different levels. Community organisation “is a process by which a community identifies its needs or objectives, gives priority to them, develops confidence and will to work at them, finds resources to deal with them, and in doing so, extends and develops a cooperative and collaborative attitude and practice in the community” (Ross, 1955). Community Organisation as a method of social work aims at two objectives; The achievement of individual community-identified goals and the development of cooperative and collaborative attitudes and practices. Community organisation is by which a community identifies its needs or objectives, develops the confidence and will to work for these needs or objectives, finds the resources (internal and/or external) to deal with these needs or objectives, takes action in respect them, and in doing so extends and develops cooperative and collaborative attitudes and practices in the community. More significantly, community organisation deals with the community's problems, which have multiple, complex causes that often require coordinated community activity to address them effectively. Thus, community organisation is making efforts to improve the quality of life that sustains life aiming at leaving no one behind (<https://anzasw.nz>), practising justice and respecting the uniqueness of human beings (Pathare, 2018) so that social workers can facilitate improvement in the quality of life and living standards of people (www.unesco.org). The community organisation has various principles that orient the community as self-reliant by organising and creating community consciousness. This is possible, but efforts have to be made to promote collective consciousness among the community members, which demands generating collectivism built on a collaborative and cooperative approach. It aims to build something of its own with a participatory approach. This begins from a bottom-up approach that people collect or come together as a community irrespective of the status of gender, class, creed and colour, so that achieve either solve a problem or achieve what they destine or define to achieve their life as a community. Efforts were focused primarily on tasks, goals and issues of resource allocation. At the same time, the initial emphasis of this method was on the coordination of social services. Planning in all significant social welfare institutions is essential because most

problems have multiple, complex causes that often require coordinated community activity to address them effectively. COVID-19 pandemic created constraints on social work practice, especially community organisation. The disease is spread worldwide irrespective of class, creed, race, and sex, and the possible remedy suggested is social distancing and social isolation.

2. Socialisation, Social Isolation and Social Distancing During COVID'19

Understanding the impact of the pandemic on human living is significant to identify challenges to practising community organisation. The practice of social distancing nurtured a distancing consciousness against human nature, communitarian, which demands addressing issues related to mental health, public health, economic life, and a safe environment. From childhood to the end of life, a man is initiated into the community. Man, as a social being, lives in the community. Every individual is initiated into the community through the socialisation process, a learning process that facilitates individuals to perform the roles ascribed and achieved. It also helps achieve roles already achieved from existing cultures, groups or communities they are part of. It means a person is inducted into a culture that instructs how to follow the precepts, norms, values and culture to become part of the society and gradually full-fledged. There are different levels this socialisation process happens:

Primary socialisation: This type of socialisation happens when a child learns the values, norms and behaviours that should be displayed to live according to a specific culture (explorable.com).

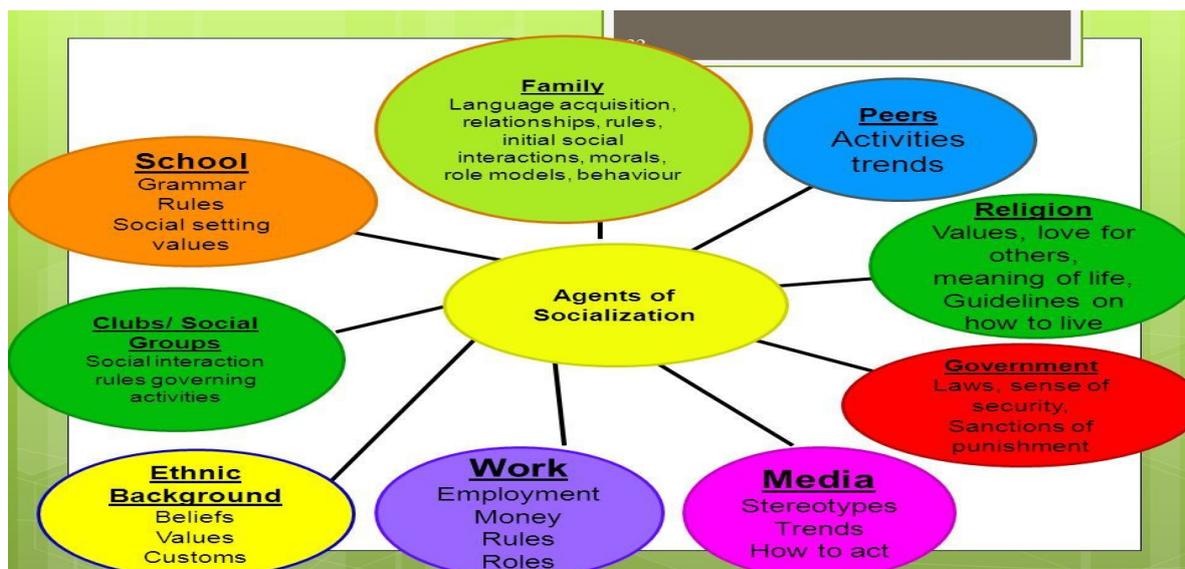
Secondary socialisation: This type of socialisation occurs when a person learns an appropriate behaviour to be displayed within a smaller group which is still part of a larger society.

Developmental socialisation: This involves a learning process that focuses on developing social skills.

Anticipatory socialisation: This type of socialisation refers to the process wherein a person practices or rehearses for future social relationships.

Resocialisation: This type of socialisation involves rejecting previous behaviour patterns and accepting new ones so that the individual can shift from one part of his life to another.

There are agents of socialisation that direct human behaviour in line with community life. They are pictured in the below-prescribed roles, employment patterns, and ethnic affiliation and gradually try to integrate men into the community.



Social isolation is when a person is absent from social contact, leading to loneliness. It is a state of being cut off from regular social networks, which can be triggered by factors such as loss of mobility, unemployment, or health issues. Isolation can involve staying at home for lengthy periods (No Isolation, 2017, April 18), having no access to services or community involvement, and little or no communication with friends, family, and acquaintances.

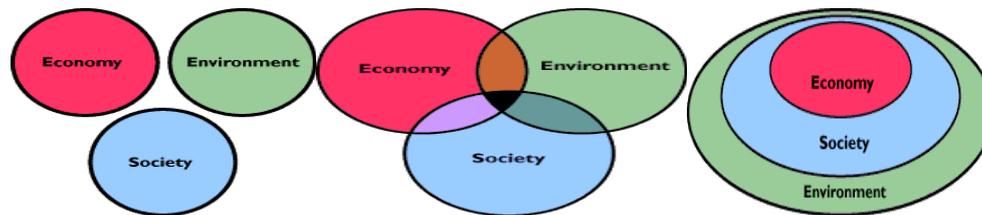
Social distancing means to avoid face to face contact. It forces man to distance himself from others physically and even inside the home where he lives with his family. It is also known as “physical distancing”, keeping space between yourself and other people outside your home. Man is oriented towards socialisation, and other agents' work for socialisation is challenged by social distancing to reduce the spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

The concern is one of the methods of social work; community organisation is trying to bring people together or community together when social distancing and social isolation happens due to COVID-19. What happens for the community that is oriented towards socialisation and method that bring people together? It also questions the primary concern of social work, the development of human beings, or to say, the development of capitals: social, economic capital, human capital and physical capital and the Common (Putnam, 2000) at all levels that attempt to define the building and bridging capitals of the society. Social workers are invited to build social networks and relationships to develop social capital. In this regard, thinking of sustainable development is a concern. Sustainable means to stay healthy, productive and meaningful in the community that reflected in the quality of life of a person.

3. Sustainable Development

The quality of life of a person and sustainable development is related to the place of living related to the environment, economy and society. When not integrated into the community, they are isolated or separated. Sustainability relates to interrelations, collaborations, linkage, and blending happens. However, real sustainability reflects that economy is one of human living. Society and man are becoming part of the concentric circle of the environment. This brings sustainability but is also related to capital development, creation, or moulding.

However, his sustainability is brought to face challenges due to COVID'19.



Source: <http://www.sustainablemeasures.com/node/42>

4. COVID-19 and Human Living

The crucial question we need to answer is if the pandemic creates havoc on human living. It needs inspection of the current living situation under the pandemic threat and strategies adopted to check the furtherance by promoting social distancing and social isolation. Instead of building community coherence and closeness, they direct community members to be distant from other community members. It creates a distancing consciousness against human nature and the principles of community organisation. Instead of inviting people to be close to the pandemic, prevention strategies direct to be distant from each other and create an artificial consciousness based on ethical consideration of not being contaminated or contagious by others. This process challenges social work practice and its goal of organising, planning, programme change and sustainable development. COVID-19 not only challenges the social work practice but brings crisis by causing depletion in nature and ecosystems. It divides people from rural-urban. It weakened employment patterns and economic structure. The social structure of society promotes individualism and challenges the care and protection structure – welfare – of the needy and sick. It challenges promoting the culture and cultural practices built upon fest and festivals, which is heaped upon the close-knit relationships, sharing of community, and neighbourhood relationship that promotes the community organisation. These further challenge social workers or community organisers to work for rehabilitating the migrants that, include rehabilitating the expatriate returning from gulf countries, interstate migrants or stranded migrants during the lockdown and their economic issues. This invite inspecting the social relationship and mental health issues reflected in work-life balancing, especially when employees must work from home and cope with family relationships and role performance. It adds to the health care awareness issue, like how we relieve the community's anxieties with the pandemic and promote a safe environment and achievement of self-reliance goals. The consensus concerning the burial or cremation of the dead infected by COVID-19 and consoling the bereaved family members who are supposed to be isolated due to close contact with the dead, with public health issues like other ailments restricted from treatment and afraid to approach health service and care being worried of infected of COVID'19 is yet another challenge aroused in the changed scenario.

5. Challenging the Professional Practice of CO

The community organisers are challenged to bring an alternative to physical distance, i.e., replacing it with virtual closeness, which can be replicated in the days ahead in community

organising methods. It demands that social workers play the role of the facilitator through the promotion of volunteerism among the people. Volunteerism reflects the self-motivated or self-initiating act, which is rooted in values that inspire to step out to step into others' lives, which is an existential and altruistic approach. It is possible by identifying people in need, addressing the issues of social distancing, and facilitating the acts of social agents to organise virtual groups and develop communication patterns. For instance, the enhanced use of social media, using WhatsApp and Facebook groups for need identification, stems from the principle of resource mobilisation (one of the principles of the community organisation method). Resource mobilisation addresses the community's economic, social, and political needs to address the community's pandemic challenges. To this, the best tool and strategy is networking using social media. The struggle and battle of the George Floyd issue in the USA and the Jayaraj Benny issue in India is disseminated to the public through social media (Hashtag campaign). It depends on communication patterns or strategies within and outside towards awareness generation.

Community organisation practice during a pandemic also prompts us to reflect upon what resources are available, especially in administrative and government projects that are not reaching the needy as expected. So, it demands a facilitating and coordinating role by the community organiser by performing his role to initiate communication with others. Because the situation has changed and restricted physical movement and possibly only virtual closeness, this challenging situation invite us to recall the philosophy, principles, and values of social work and community organising that do not change or may not change. It urges, therefore, to revisit and re-read them to equip social workers and community organisers to adapt strategies and approaches per the time's need and requirement. This poses the question of approaches deemed as a way to look for and implement the right-based or need-based approach. For instance, as the lockdown began in Kenya, many nongovernmental and community-based organisations delivered food kits to the poor and needy. This led to the rush and even stampede, which prompted the government to ban the distribution of food kits. The alternative found was organising the community via communicating with people through WhatsApp and registering their names through locally identified contact persons or leaders who are well-equipped with digital literacy. After the registration, the food kits were delivered to the doorsteps of the beneficiaries either by volunteering leaders or service delivery agencies that rendered their service at a low cost. Even some agencies, instead of food kits delivery, provided digital money through the M-Pesa of Safaricom money transaction portal. The question of the right-based or need-based approach depends on the situation, needs, and available resources. This facilitation is possible when, for example, publishing needs and resources required in the public platforms, which sometimes bring CSR initiatives or public attention that may address related issues. A social worker in India (Kerala), when there was a group of students in a village who struggled to access digital education due to the absence of mobile networks/signals or broadband networks, disseminated the students' struggle on public platforms social media. This was brought to the notice of the service providers and administrative bodies to act upon and thus resorted to the issue. It was not single-handed work, but I did network with youths and other resource persons in the community. Social workers' facilitation and other volunteers for addressing

community needs made community organising gradual realisation.

The type of approach that needs to follow is not a segregated approach between micro, meso and macro but bridges the gap for building a community. It is an integration process required to address the issues of the community. It shall be oriented towards mooting collectivism by building collective consciousness. This should be stemmed from the correct understanding of human rights and the right way of interpreting human rights in the pandemic background. It also invites to blend between approaches and practices of the community organisation. It is another way of addressing community issues and challenges keeping the ethics in the practising profession. It requires striking a balance or positioning of community organisation and strength-based approach at the individual and community level without disregarding the other approaches, especially during the lockdown period. It thus challenges to identify the strength of the individual or community building the individual or community. Lockdown is another practising time of capacity building, and an instance is the spiritual positioning of the individual. A man tempted to be spiritual, at least at practice level and visit worshipping places like church, temple or mosque or any religious places to find solace and consolation is now unable due to restricted movement and public gathering. So, community organisations can work on the spiritual or emotions and build upon the knowledge bank through channelising capacities and knowledge of the community to have a virtual gathering and guide the individual for the development of spiritual quotient, which serves as a way of building formal and informal networks.

When formal procedures are restricted due to COVID'19 it is better to look for building an informal network for developing informal leadership, which is another principle of the community organisation. For example, build a social media network of WhatsApp, Messenger, or Facebook groups. Identify people who can coordinate by volunteering to communicate and to couple needs and the challenge of people. This helps to build or evolve or facilitate social leadership in the society who are not official leaders but influence people in the community in the decision-making process through virtual communication. This will gradually help with resource mobilisation, including distributing government projects and resources to the community are not accessible to it. This builds community and gradually forms community hubs where the community is organised through emotional bonding, especially addressing problems at heart. Thus, the community organising process builds on volunteering, communicating, following up and obtaining a self-reliant community. However, another example would be promoting ward counsellors by giving virtual training to address psycho-social problems of the community and family issues, domestic violence, and child abuse, which is increasing during the lockdown. (IFSW, 2020).

6. Challenges Ahead of the Community Organiser

- 1) Removal of isolation or social distancing barriers by using socialisation agents.
- 2) Enhancing knowledge horizon, both profession and society. It inspires social workers to read and re-read about the happenings of society based on researched and published documents by approaching critically. It also should illumine community organisers to replicate other practices in the field of community social work.

- 3) Improve the skill of communication for networking and facilitating. It is yet another challenge that social workers is faced. Some of the required skill of the community organiser is:
- *Conference*: Able to consult the people by initiating a dialogue and discussion so that the people are made to realise their situation and the reasons for the existing situations. It also enables the community to equip themselves with more analysed information.
 - *Communication*: The community should be made to understand the whole process and the action plan for which information sharing is necessary. While sharing the information, there should not be any distortion or misunderstanding.
 - *Training*: The community's preparedness is essential, for which the community members must be trained. It would enable the community to be self-reliant, especially in decision-making.
 - *Consultation*: The community is consulted in all matters, especially when making any decision. It is not sharing information about the final decision; it is the process wherein the community is enabled to arrive at the best solutions for them.
 - *Negotiation*: Negotiation is to conclude by discussing with the parties involved in the issues. Community organiser plays a significant role in bringing conflicting groups to a common platform to discuss and find solutions.
 - *Conflict Resolution*: The organiser should be an expert in dealing with a conflict by assessing the conflict, understanding the conflict, finding the symptoms and causes, finding out the possible solutions, selecting an appropriate solution, working a plan of action, mobilising funds, executing the action plan and so on.
 - *Public Relations*: Establishing rapport is the essential skill of the community organiser, not only the relationship within and outside the community. Public relation skill can gain the goodwill of the community and the public.
 - *Problem Analysis*: Assist the people in solving the problem. The organiser is capable of identifying the problem and making the people identify, analyse, give priorities, select an appropriate priority, mobilise resources to make a plan of action, implement, monitor, evaluate, modify and continue.
 - *Resource Mobilisation*: Any community problem while working out a solution requires resources. The resources may be human resources, money, material and time. The organiser is aware of the availability of the resources within or outside the community and makes the people identify the sources of resources and ways to tap such resources.
 - *Organising Meeting*: The formal and informal meetings have to be organised, and information must be shared. The sharing of information enables the sharing of responsibility and decision-making.
 - *Writing Reports*: Documentation of the events for future reference and follow-up is

essential.

- *Networking*: In a community, while working with people, the participation of the people increases the power of the people.
- 4) The social worker is challenged to understand possible approaches and strategies to use. This is possible only when we are enriched with knowledge and networking, which requires enriched reading and practical experience.
 - 5) Become a community facilitator by becoming a hub of welfare initiatives for community organising. It requires the community organiser to know the existing welfare programmes and new government initiatives and what initiatives can be done to address the community's needs after assessing the existing resources and possible means of virtual networking and coordination.

7. The Paradigm of the Professional Approach

The community organiser is challenged to adopt the right approach to address the community's needs and facilitate resource mobilisation, primarily virtual. To this end, the community organiser shall read and re-read the approaches practised in community organising. As per the current pandemic scenario, the approach is determined by the situation. Because each community is unique, and its needs and problems are unique. It requires the community organiser to study the community, consult with the community, and then make the right decision. As per the social work approach and community organising as a method of social work, it is suggested to use a mix of right based, Need-based and strength-based. The most preferred approach would be a strength-based approach. Since resource mobilisation from outside the community is restricted due to the lockdown, it is good for the community organiser to focus on internal resources and strengthen them to address the community's needs.

Community Organizing During COVID'19



8. Conclusion

Social work, a practising profession, has responded to the pandemic requirement of the time, using its methods and taking intense dialogue within them to revisit and readapt. Community organisation is a method of social work that critically reflects how social distancing and social isolation are addressed in the pandemic era touring through various experiences and experiments community organisers initiated. The paper argues that strategies like networking and social and modern communication platforms facilitate community organisation practice. It is relevant to deem that the critical and creative use of the situation responding to the need of the situation is a challenge to community organisers. Therefore, it is pertinent to adopt the right approach to social work with sound philosophical backing, reflecting that social work values are an imperative requirement of the time. They bring more relevance to social work even in the current pandemic crisis.

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