«Let's stay tuned»: analysis of a community social work project during the Covid–19 pandemic

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Abstract

The paper presents an innovative community social work project carried out by a social work student during Covid-19 pandemic. The project called «Let's stay tuned» aims to promote the local community members' equal access to the formal and informal aid activated in response to the needs created by the Covid-19 pandemic. The project's features are the involvement and active participation of the members of the community, the participatory planning process and the role of social work student as relational guide. The analysed experience represents an example of how a local community can take care of its most vulnerable members, develop community bonds and promote solidarity.

Keywords

Community social work, Participatory planning, Covid-19 pandemic, Unconventional Practice Placement, Vulnerable people.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a significant source of stress for local communities, in particular for their most vulnerable members such as the elderly, children and people with disabilities. It also had a substantial impact on welfare organisations and social workers' professional commitment. In this period, in Italy, many charity organisations stepped in to respond to new and old social needs and to integrate the aid offered by the public welfare system. This paper presents — step by step — an innovative community social work project carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic in a neighbourhood in

Milan, a city in the North of Italy. The project «Let's stay tuned» aimed to promote community ties despite the physical distancing imposed during the lockdown and to provide greater knowledge and information about the ongoing social interventions. The project was promoted and implemented in the period between March and June 2020, by a social work student during her Unconventional Practice Placement scheduled for the third year of the Bachelor of Social Work degree programme (Raineri & Sala, 2019; Corradini, Landi, & Limongelli, 2020).[1]

First step: the community profile

The project «Let's stay tuned» was carried out in the Torretta neighbourhood, south of the city of Milan. About 7,000 people live in this mainly residential neighbourhood. According to Istat data (2011),[2] this neighbourhood is characterised by a medium-low socioeconomic status and by a scarce presence of public services (such as community centres, libraries, cultural centres, and supermarkets). To get to know the local community of the Torretta neighbourhood during the lockdown period, the social work student consulted websites and social media (such as Facebook), to find out about community needs and concerns, identify «key people» in the neighbourhood (such as volunteers, shopkeepers, parish priest, local politicians) and determine the social interventions implemented by the public and third sector organisations. This first step, called «community profile» (Twelvetrees, 2017), first of all, allowed the student to get to directly know the «front line» people who were already trying to cope with shared concerns and community-wide problems connected to the ongoing health emergency. The community profile highlighted a significant activation level of citizens, volunteers, social workers and other professionals belonging to different organisations such as charity organisations, Parishes, the local municipality and the neighbourhood committee. These interventions were mainly charitable, such as the home delivery of groceries and prescription drugs and the distribution of food packages. During the lockdown, some organisations guaranteed the support previously offered to employ new methods, such as the activation of helplines to support people and families in difficulties.

The community profile was built by applying a polyphonic approach, i.e. by collecting the different voices of the members of the local community. It was, therefore, possible to obtain a current picture, depicting in a genuine and in-depth way, citizens' potentials,

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[1] The analysed experience describes the project planned and implemented by Valentina Cafeo during her Unconventional Practice Placement in the academic year 2019/2020. The authors thank her for sharing her experience.

[2] Data obtained from the census carried out by Istat in 2011 (Italian National Institute of Statistics). The information about the neighbourhoods of the City of Milan was collected from the database of the local municipality (available online: https://dati.comune.milano.it/it/dataset/ds382-popolazione-popolazione-residente-caratteristiche-sezione-censimento-2011c).

resources, concerns and real needs (Lemieux & Allen, 2007). Such an approach allows enhancing the experiential knowledge (Beresford, 2010) of the people who make up that community from the preliminary stages of a community social work project.

Second step: looking for collaborators

A community social work project involves the identification of contact people belonging to the community who are interested and motivated to cope with community-wide problems and actively contribute to solving them. The well-being of communities and the solution to shared problems cannot be achieved through individual actions but through the actions of coping networks (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017). During the phase of the creation of the community profile, the student identified some members of the local community available to help her in planning and implementing her learning experience of Unconventional Practice Placement. The people with whom the student interacted are two citizens residing in the neighbourhood, a local politician and a volunteer, a member of a charity organisation. These people remotely collaborated (through the use of social media) with her in acquiring detailed information about the living conditions of the community members and defining the concerns and community-wide problems caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. During the first moments of discussion, the need arose to collect the point of view (in terms of experiences, moods, needs and potential) of a greater number of people belonging to the local community, in order also to reach marginalised categories. To this end, the student and her collaborators decided to launch an online survey (the only possible tool in the lockdown phase) aimed at getting a detailed community profile and knowing the real needs of the neighbourhood residents (Twelvetrees, 2002). The survey was disseminated mainly through social media. In order to reach marginalised people, it was necessary to collaborate with other «key figures» of the community, acting as intermediates, to explain the meaning of the survey and collect opinions and experiences. Thanks to the survey, the community profile was enriched. In addition to the financial problems caused — or sometimes aggravated — by the health emergency, the neighbourhood residents also reported the desire to be more informed on the social interventions in support of individuals and families. Despite the commitment and activities carried out by the local community to respond to the new social needs, the data collected revealed a limited connection between the various organisations involved, poor integration among the various ongoing social interventions, and lack of knowledge about the initiatives promoted among the residents. This situation was described by many as a concern, as some people, despite being in difficulties, did not know whom to contact for help, thus risking of not being able to benefit from the social interventions available. It is precisely because of these concerns that open and participatory planning began.

Third step: promoting participatory planning

In the remote meetings, carried out through the support of social media, the coping network identified and shared common concerns. Therefore, the collaborators and the student combined their motivations and skills (both professional and experiential) to cope with them. This methodological phase is called catalysation of the coping network, i.e. «a set of relationships among people concerned about a shared goal» (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017, p. 17), such as sorting out a community-wide problem. In this case, the common aim co-defined by the members of the coping network was to promote the local community members' equal access to the formal and informal aid activated in response to the needs created by the Covid-19 pandemic. Practically, the project aims the following different, specific goals:

- – disseminating in a widespread manner the information necessary to prevent the Covid-19 infection and gain access to formal and informal aid;
- – promoting a dialogue between the numerous public and third sector organisations committed to supporting people and families in difficulties;
- – raising awareness among community members about the living conditions of people and families residing in the neighbourhood and affected by the socio-economic effects of the pandemic;
- – encourage the participation of the community in taking care of itself and cope with the neighbourhood residents' social life problems.

To pursue these objectives, the coping network designed and implemented concrete initiatives, albeit remotely, which envisaged the involvement of other community members, in addition to already active collaborators. The Project actions are presented in the next paragraph.

From a methodological point of view, the design was carried out collaboratively (Panciroli, 2017). Each member of the coping network participated in every phase of the decision-making process, thus developing open and participatory planning at the community level. Practically, project goals and strategies are the results of a problem-solving process through which creativity and reflexivity have been stimulated (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017). In Unconventional Practice Placement, this creative process is led by the student who acts as a relational guide (Folgheraiter, 2004). The student operates both inside and outside the coping network. He/she operates inside because he/she shares the concerns, actively participates in the decision-making process regarding the strategies for coping with the issues, and acts at the same level of his/her collaborators (Panciroli, 2017). Besides, he/she operates outside the network because he/she observes the action of the coping network from an external point of view, to guide it (and sometimes re-direct it) towards the achievement of the shared goal. From this position, the relational guide provides his/her feedback to stimulate creativity and reflexivity in the collaborators and facilitate the dialogue among them.

Fourth step: the project in action

To meet the need for providing all neighbourhood residents with adequate information regarding the formal and informal aid available in support of people and families affected by the pandemic, the members of the coping network decided to create a bulletin board, a virtual one, through Facebook, and tangible ones, in different locations of the neighbourhood. This information space was not managed exclusively by the student and her collaborators. In fact, through an awareness-raising and promotion action, all the neighbourhood residents were invited to contribute to the dissemination of useful news and the promotion of social interventions, by posting (virtually and concretely) news and information on the bulletin boards. The bulletin boards were also used to disseminate official and authentic news regarding the health emergency, in order to limit the spreading of false alarms and prevent further infections. Such a simple action, not only responded to the need for information and diffusion of the available aids but also stimulated the community members' participation allowing them to become key players/promoters and not just aid recipients. For example, some services users shared on the bulletin boards the information collected through their direct experience with social services.

Given the intense work carried out during the lockdown by public and third sector organisations in offering formal and informal aid in the neighbourhood, many social interventions overlapped and not reaching all the people who could benefit from them. This risk was created by the lack of dialogue among the different organisations, also aggravated by the ongoing emergency. The coping network, therefore, promoted a series of online meetings between the various representatives of these organisations to discuss the needs that emerged during the pandemic and share information about ongoing initiatives. The goal of the project was to create a network of organisations capable of providing integrated and coordinated aid in the neighbourhood.

Thanks to the promoting actions of the «Let's stay tuned» project, carried out by the members of the coping network, many citizens showed interest and curiosity, expressing their desire to take part in the project. The coping network, therefore, reflected on the opportunity to enlarge the network to include other community members in the project (Panciroli, 2017). This methodological step can be defined as «network expansion» (Folgheraiter, 2004). The involvement of new collaborators led to the planning of two unexpected initiatives. Some citizens, recognised as reliable, made themselves available to become points of reference for fellow citizens in difficulties, offering useful information to cope with the present challenging time. They made their skills available to the community, helping people to solve everyday problems and eventually direct and accompany them to the social workers of public and third sector organisations. For example, a teacher and a librarian made themselves available to support children and families in the management of problems related to distance learning and other issues related to education.

The pandemic significantly affected the financial situation of many people and families, making it difficult or impossible for some to purchase basic necessities. This consideration moved the neighbourhood residents and shopkeepers to give their contribution by offering concrete help to those who were in this condition. On the initiative of a shopkeeper, the idea was born of establishing «suspended food packages», i.e. baskets placed in the neighbourhood containing basic necessities donated by citizens and shopkeepers were made available to anyone who needed them. This initiative allowed people in difficulties to receive help without having to turn to social services, thus avoiding the sense of shame that people sometimes feel when asking for help. These two actions, emerged spontaneously from the involvement of other community members and characterised by a high level of solidarity, could not have been realised without the contribution of people belonging to the community.

Fifth step: monitoring and evaluating the project

The student, as a relational guide, always supported the action of the coping network by organising remote meetings dedicated to monitoring and verifying the progress of the project and the results of the ongoing actions. A relational guide supports his/her collaborators throughout the process to ensure that action strategy is consistent with the defined goals (Folgheraiter, 2004). The student organised dialogue opportunities with her collaborators aimed at reflecting on what had been done, the difficulties encountered and finding new strategies for coping with further issues. For example, initially the «suspended food packages» were not picked up by the residents, although some families were in financial difficulties. In a meeting, the members of the coping network reflected on the possible issues related to this action and examined, through a group brainstorming, other strategies to make the help offered effective. Subsequently, the coping network decided to move the collection points to different locations in the neighbourhood, such as near grocery stores (the only ones open during the lockdown period) and in the streets adjacent to public residential housing condominiums.

Although the student has concluded her practice learning, the community social work project continues. The starting conditions that stimulated an open and participatory planning significantly changed during the post lockdown, but the motivation to take action to support the community is still present. In the last monitoring and evaluation meetings, the student dedicated time and space to address the possible continuation of the project even in her absence. This phase also required a creative reflection, in terms of needs and concerns, to give space to all members of the coping network to express their view. Thus the student was able to pass the baton of her function as a relational guide to an active citizen who, from the early design stages, had contributed significantly to the planning and implementing of the community social work project.

Conclusion

The project described is an example of a community social work project conceived and implemented thanks to the involvement and active participation of the members of the community. As the project emerged «from below» and from a real and heartfelt community concern (Raineri & Sala, 2019), it allowed reaching people belonging to marginalised categories, difficult to be directly contacted by social services professionals. The social interventions carried out responded to old needs — sometimes still submerged — and represented effective strategies to cope with new challenges arising from the emergency caused by the pandemic.

The analysed experience is an example of how a local community can act to take care of its most vulnerable members, by sharing personal resources, experiential skills and mutual trust. Responding creatively and collaboratively to community-wide problems generated by the Covid-19 pandemic move it resulted in the community development and the promotion of solidarity (Panciroli, 2017). The student, in the role of a social worker, acted as a relational guide helping members of the local community to come together to identify co-defined common aims (Folgheraiter e Raineri, 2017), necessary for coping with the difficulties caused by the health emergency. A relational guide supports the coping network, enhancing diversity and stimulating creativity and reflexivity in the decision-making process to promote strategies for coping with community-wide problems (Raineri & Sala, 2019). Thus, problems are not addressed by implementing the solutions offered by the relational guide but with the help of the members of the local community. They, with the support of the community social worker, came together to improve the situation of their neighbourhood.

When a social worker follows this method, he/she is more likely to design and implement projects that are effective and sustainable over time, even after he/she is out of it.

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