

**COMMUNITY SOCIAL WORK:
FROM MITIGATING THE CONSEQUENCES
TO REMOVING THE CAUSES OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS**
Nino Žganec. *Socijalni rad u zajednici*. Jastrebarsko: Naklada slap, 2022, pp. 248.

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The development of professional social work is rooted in non-institutional, voluntary, and mutual help based on solidarity, cohesion, and care for vulnerable members of society. Social work has survived to this day and developed into the main instrument of organized social action aimed at serving individuals, their families, groups they belong to, or entire communities. Professional social workers act in the best interest of such subjects with the aim of providing them support in leading an independent life with dignity.

An important step forward in social work practice is precisely its orientation towards the community as the goal, strength, and source of strength. In that context, the community becomes a unit of action and an “instrument” used not only by professionals in uncovering those strengths but also by individuals themselves.

The author Nino Žganec in his monograph *Community Social Work*, published by Naklada slap in 2022, not only explains the developmental path of social work and the need for its progress in the domain of working inside a community but also presents a concrete contribution to the education of beginners and professionals in the field of assistive professions, offering practical guidelines in terms of the application of new strategies and methods. Before taking a critical look at the structure, goals, and methods he applies in approaching the subject matter, we shall present some of the aforementioned facts related to community social work.

This area of work, still not sufficiently developed in our and neighboring countries, though increasingly necessary, possesses significant potential but is also faced with peculiar obstacles. The positive effect of the application of community social work consists of its inclination toward preventing, developing, and removing the causes of social problems rather than towards exclusively mitigating their consequences. The aspect of motivating people to, together with experts, discover new resources and potentials where there did not seem to be any and to act together to their own advantage represents a new strain and a novel response to contemporary social circumstances. On the other hand, the challenges practitioners face are primarily based in the fact that this area of social work, more than any other, is affected by unpredictable economic, social, and political developments, specifically the ones concerned with the advancement of social policy. In that sense, as the author warns, experts, beneficiaries, and other community members are faced with the challenge of not knowing how to unite and aim their efforts towards humanitarian goals and changes and how not to maintain the existing state of affairs, while at the same time avoiding starting to act out of political interests and becoming victims of manipulation on the part of social strains that do

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indeed strive towards maintaining the status quo, regardless of how unsuitable the living conditions it generates may be. Additionally, working in the community involves the agreement of a large number of people concerning priorities that need to be focused on, so this diversity creates a fertile ground for conflicts, as opposed to cohesion.

Despite the aforementioned difficulties, and as noted by the authors Milosavljević and Brkić when speaking about working in the community, social workers who expect others to change the circumstances in which they live and work are quite misled. For the reasons listed above, it is recommended to conduct one's professional development towards learning how to cope with new and unknown challenges, as opposed to renouncing the practice of working in the community altogether.

Dr. Nino Žganec's work consists of a foreword and three thematic units, each prefaced by a short explanation of the significance of its content. The *Introduction* is divided into several subsections, in which the author sets the basic terminology, explains the values, principles, and goals community social work is based on, and presents a brief historical overview of its development. Following that, in the section titled *Contemporary Theoretical Approaches in the Field of Community Social Work*, the author provides a detailed description of the diversity of theoretical approaches, practical models, and theoretical concepts. The final thematic unit is focused on the actual practice of *Community Social Work*, and it explains the phases of the process that take place in practice, along with methods, strategies, tactics, typical areas, and potential roles of experts. This section is followed by final remarks and a rich reference list that can serve as orientation in further professional development. Especially significant for trainees are the revision questions at the end of each subsection, as well as the index section at the end of the book.

Already at the beginning of the monograph, the author specifies that its purpose is to guide readers, especially those in the field of social work or other related professions, to evaluate their work and approach it from the "perspective of the environment in which they conduct their activities" (p. 9). Beginners and experts alike should, by reading this material, above all else, learn to be guided by the following idea: "real and permanent changes in people's lives are only possible if their environment constantly changes" (p. 9). In addition, it is important to develop the skill of thinking critically and reexamining existing practices, policies, and circumstances, as this is exactly where it is possible to find a chance for a new, creative approach that will provide authentic ways of facing the day-to-day challenges of contemporary society. One of the examples cited in the monograph is an innovative approach to the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of exclusively considering this event as a source of new problems, the author sees it as an opportunity for developing new possibilities, along with solidarity, interdependence, and integration of communities, as these factors proved key in overcoming the consequences of the spread of the virus. Quarantining brought to the surface the importance of living in a community and of the community itself, as well as the consequences of losing social connections, contacts, and roles. Finally, a significant basis of all the goals is actually becoming familiar with the theory and the techniques entailed by the methodology of community social work. Having this as his starting point, Dr. Nino Žganec offers *Community Social Work* as a clear, concise, and comprehensive foundation on which further opportunities, approaches, and practices will be developed and explored.

In the *Introduction*, the author does not attempt to define community social work as an isolated concept. He provides gradual explanations of the key terms this field of work is based around. As previously mentioned, one of the approaches of community social work involves using known and available resources to discover and build new ones. That is precisely how the author approaches defining the term: he "builds" it out of the terms that beginners and professionals are already familiar with to a certain degree. This well-paced approach to defining

the term and what the term is for the most part represents the creative potential of this monograph. He further evaluates the worth of community social work, with an emphasis on the principles of social justice, human rights and the idea of standing up for the marginalized members of society with the aim of establishing connections among people in the community so they would together strive for progressive change. The *Introduction* ends with a section dedicated to historical development, which is not cumbersome for the reader, as the author says its aim is not to conduct an in-depth historical overview but to explain those segments of development that hold particular value for the revival of the practice of community social work. Since the United States of America is the birthplace of social work, the country is an essential part of the historical overview. The Dutch approach of “working in society”, developed after World War Two, and the German magazine “Soziale Welt”, which published numerous articles on organizing the community in the 1950s, are significant examples of the development of community social work in Europe and is comparable to its development in the USA. The future of social work in these countries, as pointed out by the author, will depend on the past and contemporary political climates. Also featured is the description of the development of a new type of social work in Croatia with the implication of a gap during the period of socialism, to be discussed later. The description of the development of the theory of community social work serves as preparation for understanding the next chapter.

The biggest quality of the second thematic unit, *Contemporary Theoretical Approaches in the Field of Community Social Work*, is reflected in the simplicity of expression and in its systematic division into sections, which allows the reader to concisely understand and process the material. As this entire unit involves acquiring a wealth of information related to theoretical approaches, concepts, and practical models, an understandable and simple writing style contributes to reducing imprecision and confusion, making reading and learning easier. In addition to other theories, to which the author dedicates no more than a few sentences, the *theory of social planning* is the leading one in the field of social work, which is why it is given the most significance. The approaches that the author deals with are: the ecological approach, the approach of political action, the approach of relationships in the community, and the integrative approach. In the section concerning models as means of “predicting desired results of conducted actions” (p. 123), the *community development model* is described in most detail, whereas 11 others are briefly discussed. The rest of the concepts highlighted by the author as especially significant for Europe and, therefore, the concepts of the welfare state and social work in city quarters are discussed further, along with the catalytically-empowering, aggressive, and work-in-milieu concepts. Two important names the author is impressed by are Saul D. Alinsky and Paulo Freire, famous predominantly for their empowering effect on people.

The author takes the same approach in terms of the last thematic unit (*Community Social Work - Phases of the Process, Methods, Strategies, and Areas of Work*), placed at the end of the monograph: it provides a practical component which would enable a trainee to take their first action in the community, build new alliances and cooperate in the spirit of a multidimensional and multi-methodological approach.

The outlined methods include: social protests, legal representation, education in the community, self-help, negotiation and lobbying, action research, and “whistling”. Achieving changes in a community is based on mobilizing people, entering the community, planning the change, and finding a way for the implemented practice to be accepted by the community, that is, developing appropriate strategies, skills, and styles - all achieved through the tactics of cooperation, campaigning or opposition and presented to readers by the author. By describing the area of work and the possible roles of experts, the author aims to cast as wide a net as he can, as it is almost impossible to cover all known and potential variants.

A point where the author lacks consistency is the emphasis on the necessary existence of a democratic society as the core for the development of the branch of social work discussed in this case. In order for changes to occur “from the bottom up” in a natural way, he stresses, centralization must be completely eradicated from the existing social system, as it prevents the development of initiatives and innovations, and the organization of services exists only on the local levels of government. Therefore, in order for the voices of marginalized groups to be heard in a society, it is necessary for the society to be open to hearing all people, regardless of their socioeconomic status. The discontinuity of the idea appears when the author associates the absence of these conditions with socialist ideas and systems of government. He mentions that, in such regimes, community social work stagnates because people cannot become aware of the necessity and the possibility of having their needs met, as well as that this system did not allow for the development of scientific literature. Without tending to make comparisons in terms of values between the current and any of the previous regimes in our and the neighboring countries, it is clear that socialism as an idea and a concept was aimed at organizing the country in such a way that would eliminate inequality, that is, build a society suitable for all its members. The idea of giving community members affected by inequality the opportunity to overcome it (labeled by the author as an important paradigm of community social work) is completely in accordance with that. In addition, the book presents information on a new global ten-year plan for social work leading up to 2030, based on the African concept of *Ubuntu* (“I exist for we exist”) (p. 23), which would clearly suit the goals of socialist ideologies.

Historical facts suggest that the branch of social work discussed here is and has been significantly less present in socialist countries past and present, but there should be room left for and special attention paid to the analysis of causes in this respect. Since the values and goals of these two seemingly opposing social phenomena (socialism and the community social work) are, in essence, equal (being the achievement of the best possible position of the marginalized, that is, the reduction of socioeconomic differences among people by approaching problem-solving in a communitary way), the following question should be considered: did a regime such as the socialist one lack the possibility or the need for community social work? The author, without a detailed critical discussion, slightly clumsily suggests an answer on several occasions, but without sufficient deliberation, which could be confusing for the reader. If the existence of certain facts (in this case, democracy and decentralization) is taken as a primary condition for the development and survival of the examined concept (community social work), and is directly negatively correlated with a certain system of government (socialism), such a correlation must be factually analyzed in detail. Community social work is, by its nature, aimed at structural changes, that is, to working “from the bottom up”. Should experts and citizens plan on changing the existing policies and practices, it would be important to know what type of change they are aiming for and why, or, otherwise, what kind of change they wish to avoid.

As already mentioned, the aim of writing this monograph was not a discussion on this topic but rather the development of educational material for experts. Without reducing the need for the analysis of the aforementioned correlation, the reason why the author does not sufficiently focus on it may be caused by the author’s primary goal. A special detail lending itself in favor of this assertion is the author’s own note that says that it would be “pretentious to set for oneself a goal of describing the entire complexity of the idea associated with the concept of community in one book” (p. 14). In this way, he explains that the topic is open for further interpretation and analysis but also for new questions, approaches, or supplements. Disregarding the shortcomings discussed in the previous paragraph, *Community Social Work* is a modern, understandable, and usable material for the professional development of present and future generations of experts in the field of the humanities.