

## **Social work in the shadow: A reflection on the role of informal actors in social work**

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Social support is often seen as the exclusive domain of the state and of 'formal' social work organizations on the one hand or recipients' own personal network on the other hand. This paper calls attention to a range of informal support providers that are often overlooked as relevant actors, such as citizens' initiatives, migrant organizations, religious organizations or sport clubs. Several qualitative research projects in which we were involved (on transmigration (2007-2015), border-crossing social work (2017-2019) and the cooperation between formal and informal actors in the social domain (2018-2019)) have clearly outlined how these actors conduct social work practices 'in the shadow'.

Many of these initiatives are unknown to the 'formal' social work sector and to policy makers and are therefore not recognized as social work practices. At the same time, they often provide what are in essence basic social services to (often disenfranchised) population groups that are underserved by the formal social service systems. Because of their distinct, non-formal identities and modus operandi, informal support providers are well positioned to win the trust of those with little trust in 'the formal system'. From that position, they can either function as a link, connecting low trust citizens to formal services, or can step into the void and provide alternative social services themselves.

On another level, the transition from a 'hybrid' welfare state to new models of social support provision entails an increasing emphasis on voluntary work as integral to the delivery of welfare. The Dutch Social Support Act of 2007, for example, stipulates that care and social support are first and foremost the responsibility of citizens themselves. The Belgian government uses a similar discourse in its de-institutionalization policy. This process requires a redefinition of roles and responsibilities between formal and informal providers of social services. The ultimate aim is an integrated approach and fluid cooperation between the two. A process which – as our research has shown – is not self-evident. At the minimum, the process is hindered by a lack of knowledge and familiarity with the other party. At worst, stereotypes and distrust create barriers, so that formal and informal providers of social services operate in two parallel worlds.

In this paper, we first discuss the specific role of these informal actors in the provision of services, activities and support. We then explore their position 'in the shadow' and discuss a number of crucial challenges in the relationships between these informal actors and more formalized social work organizations on the one hand and policy makers on the other. We end with an exploration of the ways in which the gap between formal and informal actors can be bridged, and which forms of cooperation and division of responsibilities are realistic and useful to aim at.