

Press statement

Social work highlights threats to food and water supplies for the poorest people during national lockdowns and the need to recognise the personal health risks being taken by social workers in discussion with the Commonwealth Secretariat in response to the Covid-19 pandemic



COSW Board member David N Jones talking with Commonwealth Secretary General Lady Patricia Scotland during the Commonwealth pandemic virtual consultation

The Commonwealth Organisation for Social Work (COSW) participated in the first ever virtual meeting of Accredited Commonwealth Organisations on 16 April 2020. It was convened by the Commonwealth Secretary General to develop partnership strategies across the Commonwealth in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Around 20 Commonwealth Organisations took part by invitation of the Commonwealth Secretariat.

COSW Chair, Teoh Ai Hua (Malaysia) said: '*The Covid-19 pandemic presents a huge **social** threat to the world. Managing the medical emergency is just the start of the challenge. Social workers are in touch with those who are most vulnerable around the world. We must immediately ensure supplies of basic food and water to those who now have no income, including refugees and migrants and those living in slums and informal settlements.*'

David Jones informed the Secretary General of the close working relationship between COSW and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the lead global body for the social work profession. He pointed to the many examples of social work activity in response to the pandemic available at www.ifsw.org.

David highlighted a mental health helpline which has been set up in Chennai, India, community education activity by social workers in the rural areas around Thika, Kenya and development of ethical guidelines by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW).

He voiced concern about the increase in domestic violence and mental health problems, the growth in online child abuse and the challenges for social workers investigating safeguarding risks during a period of social distancing; new forms of investigation must be developed.



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David said: 'this is a social and economic crisis as well as a health crisis. Social workers are concerned about the threat to basic food and water for people who earn just enough to buy the next food with no savings to survive a lockdown. We are hearing disturbing stories of women being beaten by police in west Africa for going to draw water from a standpipe during lockdown and challenges for people with disabilities cut off from their carers.

COSW submitted a briefing to the meeting highlighting the crucial role of social work and social services alongside health services during a pandemic (attached).

David said: '*in many cases social workers and social carers are exposed to the same risks of infection as nurses, not only of themselves but also their families, but this is rarely acknowledged and they rarely have access to personal protection equipment (PPE)*'. David welcomed the UK government belated recognition of the importance of the social care sector.

Teoh Ai Hua, COSW Chair, welcomed the consultation and said: '*COSW stands ready to work with other Commonwealth Organisations and the Commonwealth Secretariat to develop appropriate and flexible responses to Covid-19 and to share examples of innovative practice by social workers through the COSW and IFSW networks*'.

19 April 2020

Note for Editors

COSW is an organisation for citizens of the Commonwealth who work in or who are interested in supporting social work and social development. It is supported by a number of social work associations in the Commonwealth. It aims to promote and support communication and collaboration between social workers and social work associations of Commonwealth countries, and to uphold and promote the code of ethics of the International Federation of Social Workers.

Teoh Ai Hua is COSW Chair and is a social work educator based in Malaysia.

Dr David N Jones is a COSW Board member and representative to the Commonwealth institutions in London. He is also Chair of the British Association of Social Workers International Committee and Global Coordinator of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development.

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