

**CODE OF  
ETHICS  
FOR SOCIAL  
ASSISTANTS AND  
SOCIAL WORK IN  
FRENCH-SPEAKING BELGIUM**





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# PREAMBLE

# HISTORY

The first Code of Ethics was produced in 1948, supported by various professional associations of social workers.

It has been revised several times over the years, in particular to bring it into line with the Code of Ethics of the IFSW (International Federation of Social Workers), which was created in 1976. At that point the UFAS (Union professionnelle Francophone des Assistants Sociaux – Professional Union of French-speaking Social Assistants in Belgium), which includes the different professional associations, spearheaded the reforms.

The Belgian state reform in 1980, which enshrined the Communities and Regions in law and granted them powers in the field of health and social care, led the UFAS to implement, on its own, a Code of Ethics specific to French-speaking Social Assistants<sup>1</sup>.

In 1985, a final version of the Code was published in the journal “Action Sociale”, as the result of consultation between the professional field, the academic community and employers.

Since the 2000s, social work has faced considerable questions relating to the definition of its goals, objectives, independence, working conditions and so on.

This was the reason for people representing 15 sectors to issue the Manifesto for Social Work, initiated by the CVTS (Comité de Vigilance en Travail Social – Monitoring Committee for Social Work) in 2017. It was revised in 2021 to integrate the changes made to the IFSW’s Statement of Ethical Principles, updated in 2018.

In its wake, the CFTS (Collectif des Formatrices et Formateurs en Travail Social – Social Work Lecturers’ Collective), which unites teaching staff from SA schools and specialised educators, issued a Manifesto for Education in Social Work in 2024.

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1 For ease of reading, we will use the abbreviation ‘SA’ to designate social assistants throughout the text.

At the beginning of 2024, it was announced that the UFAS would cease to exist. This has led these collectives and figures representing the field of social work to take up the baton, ensuring that the Code of Ethics, which also needs to be updated, has a renewed legitimacy.

The CVTS has set up a working group to tackle this task. This group is composed of people working in the field and federations representing various sectors, lecturers in social work, and associations representing beneficiaries.

You will find the results of this work below.

# SCOPE

This Code of Ethics applies to SAs holding the title of Social Assistant or Social Support Worker, as protected by the law of 12 June 1945 (Belgian Official Gazette, 21.07.1945).

*“No one shall use the title of social assistant or social support worker unless they have obtained the relevant diploma, issued in accordance with the provisions of the Royal Decrees which govern the granting of it. The designation of social support worker or social assistant is reserved for persons of either sex who hold this diploma.”*

Art. 1.

It is clear that although the job title is protected, the role is not always. Many workers with a range of profiles who are not qualified SAs are expected to do social work in the field, facing the same deontological and ethical issues.

The CVTS therefore reiterates that at present, this Code of Ethics applies to all SAs, regardless of the sector in which they work, and also to workers in the field of social work whose objectives are similar to those of SAs and meet the recognised definitions of social work.

This Code of Ethics is in line with the previous code and incorporates its fundamental principles.

*“The ethical code provides a shared reference, allowing Social Assistants and people who practice social work to evaluate the behaviour to adopt in various professional situations and to find a balance between their obligations to their employer and to the people who request their services”*

UFAS Code of Ethics, Introduction, point 1.1

In the event of a conflict of interests, the interests of individuals always take precedence.

*“The Social Assistant makes a personal commitment to practice social service in accordance with the rules of good practice and in accordance with the principles set out in this Code of Ethics, in any sector of Social Service and Social Action where he or she is expected to carry out a professional activity.”*

UFAS Code of Ethics, Introduction, point 1.4

This code should be taken as a whole: the individual articles of the code cannot be isolated from each other and must be understood as interdependent.

This document constitutes the first version (12 September 2025) of the Code of Ethics for Social Assistants and social work. It marks a significant step in the formalisation of our ethical and professional principles. The aim of these general principles is to orient professionals in their ethical reflections by providing a frame of reference within which to analyse particular situations, which are always to be considered with respect for the rights and dignity of the people receiving support.

This code is expected to evolve along with practices, collective reflections and feedback from the field by means of a process put in place by the CVTS.

# DEFINITIONS

## SOCIAL WORKER

*“Social Assistants are professionals in social service and social action. As such, they must promote social justice, social change, citizenship, problem-solving in the context of human relationships, information, advocacy and the promotion of rights, the empowerment of individuals and communities, and the capacities and resources of individuals and communities, in order to improve their wellbeing.*

*Their actions are to be based on a system of values that guarantees the principles set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and interacts with constantly changing contexts.*

*As professionals in collective action and individual support, their primary tools are human relationships and strategic analysis, and they participate in prevention measures, the fight against exclusion, and development projects.*

*They draw attention to the problems posed by the functioning of society by placing humanity at the centre of their concerns. They highlight social issues and guide social policies. They challenge the various stakeholders in social policies and participate in the development of proposals, innovative practices and change processes. They act in accordance with the ethical principles specific to their profession.”*

Skills set, Bachelor’s Degree Social Assistant, Higher Social Council, 23 April 2010, p.1

## **SOCIAL WORK:**

### International definition:

*“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.”*

International Federation of Social Workers – 2014

### National definition:

*“Social work is based on:*

- \* The guarantee given to each individual or group that they may affirm their place as a subject who is fully included in society, with respect for their fundamental rights and self-determination.*
- \* The guarantee of professional confidentiality resulting from the choice to have a strong society. This allows everyone the opportunity to be heard without being judged and to be helped by continuing to decide for themselves, and it allows professionals to take action by assessing all the consequences. As such, it contributes to making life in society possible.*
- \* The guarantee that social policies are always characterised by a concern for justice, equality and equity in the analysis of social situations, whether individual or collective, and in the support of individuals.*

*Social work may therefore never serve the purposes of:*

- \* Control*
- \* Guaranteeing public and moral order*
- \* Designating which people are deserving and which are not”*

Manifesto for Social Work – Comité de Vigilance en Travail Social (CVTS) – 2021

# LEGAL AND REGULATORY BASIS

The principles set out in this Code are based on:

- \* the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted on 10 December 1948)
- \* the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (adopted in 1950, in force from 1953, then revised in 1994 and in force from 1998)
- \* the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted on 20 November 1989, in force from 2 September 1990)
- \* the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (adopted on 12 December 2006)
- \* the Belgian Constitution and the legislation derived from it
- \* the document issued by the Council of Europe on the ethics of social workers (Council of Europe Resolution (67) 16, adopted by the Ministers' Deputies on 29 June 1967).
- \* the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles by the International Federation of Social Workers (revised in 2018).



**CODE OF  
ETHICS**

# 1. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- 1.1.** Social work, regardless of its institutional roots, is conducted in the service of social justice, human dignity and human rights.
- 1.2.** The individual is the subject of social intervention. SAs recognise individuals' capacities and desire for self-determination.
- 1.3.** The person's involvement and self-determination require access to institutional and social resources, time, and consideration of the psychological/medical/social, cultural and economic contexts in which he or she is embedded.
- 1.4.** SAs ensure that the individuals they support have access to rights, and more generally, work to promote social rights, which are inseparable from a just society.
- 1.5.** SAs are qualified to build the support of individuals and groups in accordance with the objectives of their organisation and with deontological and ethical principles. Social support demands that social assistants use all the room for manoeuvre they have to find the most appropriate solution in the situations they encounter.
- 1.6.** As privileged witnesses to social inequalities and setbacks to the rule of law, SAs ensure that social stakeholders (colleagues, employers, federations, communities, political decision-makers, etc.) are challenged and mobilised. They contribute to institutional innovation and to the creation of new responses to the social problems they identify.

## 2. SOCIAL INTERVENTION

- 2.1.** All individuals have the right to interventions by SAs. They must be able to benefit from the services offered by the social work organisation to which they turn or, where appropriate, to receive information and be referred to the relevant service.
- 2.2.** All of SAs' professional activity is based on unconditional respect for the individual, without discriminating by gender, origin, cultural affiliation or a perceived race, social status, political, philosophical or religious opinions or any other similar criteria.
- 2.3.** SAs' aim is to create conditions favourable to the expression of the interests and wishes of the people and groups with whom they work in the course of their profession. To do so, they rely on their expertise and skills. SAs design their interventions to enable people to develop their resources and their opportunities to take action.
- 2.4.** SAs offer their services but do not impose them. The informed consent of the parties concerned is required before any intervention.
- 2.5.** SAs have the skills to assess a situation, make sense of it, communicate and organise their work accordingly. They must be given the time needed to reflect on their work.
- 2.6.** SAs have the right to refuse workloads that are incompatible with the quality of their work.
- 2.7.** SAs act by evaluating the consequences of their interventions in people's lives and communicating their analysis to them.

## 3. PROFESSIONAL CONFIDENTIALITY

Respect for professional confidentiality is a right for the individual being supported and a duty for the SA. Professional confidentiality protects the interests of the individual, professions and ultimately the interests of society. It is an essential tool of social work that allows a bond of trust, used to serve the aims of emancipation. It affirms the individual as the subject of the intervention.

- 3.1.** As trusted confidant, SAs are bound by professional confidentiality.
- 3.2.** Professional confidentiality is fundamental to the relationship of trust that is essential to social work.
- 3.3.** SAs must master its rules, scope, and the exceptions to it.
- 3.4.** In particular, digital tools and new technologies raise questions about respecting professional confidentiality. These tools and technologies require special, systematic vigilance. SAs must inform people of the associated issues and challenges.
- 3.5.** SAs safeguard the confidentiality of the information about an individual that is gathered and exchanged, whether orally or in writing, and regardless of the medium used. The conditions of the interview must permit confidentiality and respect for professional confidentiality.

## 4. DUTY TO COLLABORATE

The reality of social work, regardless of the sector of activity in which it is practiced, is usually reflected in a need for collaboration between professionals performing different roles in the interest of the individual.

- 4.1.** Such collaboration requires an understanding of professional cultures and an equal dialogue between them.
- 4.2.** The SA's attitude towards any other provider of social work is based on trust, the sharing of professional expertise and an active exploration of potential avenues for action.
- 4.3.** This collaboration regularly involves the sharing of information. The sharing of information is strictly regulated and can only occur in compliance with all of the following conditions:
  - \* Duty to inform: The SA must provide the individual with complete and objective information about the goal, purpose and methods of sharing (stating exactly which specific information will be shared and which people will receive it) and the consequences of their consent or refusal;
  - \* Informed consent: Information can only be shared with the free and informed consent of the individual concerned;
  - \* Necessary confidant status: The partner receiving the information must also be bound by professional confidentiality;
  - \* Shared objective: Information may only be shared with a partner pursuing the same goals and objectives with regard to the individual in question;

- \* Principle of proportionality: Whatever the nature of the information exchanged, it must be strictly limited to what is necessary for the fulfilment of the shared objectives.

**4.4.** In all cases, the sharing of information about the individual receiving support remains exceptional. Professional confidentiality is the rule.

## 5. LIFELONG LEARNING

It is essential for all SAs to engage in opportunities for collective reflection, peer supervision and training in order to cope with the complexity of the realities they face, to understand the issues surrounding the systems and mechanisms that give rise to inequalities.

- 5.1.** Throughout their career, SAs are committed to enhancing their professional skills.
- 5.2.** As SAs are human beings situated in a particular context, they must be capable of self-reflection regarding their own value system and the perceptions that come into play in their interventions.
- 5.3.** SAs are committed to taking a step back to reflect on their role and refine their approach in relation to the professional and ethical issues facing the profession including the political dimensions of these.
- 5.4.** SAs must be provided with working conditions that enable them to keep their knowledge update and take a critical and creative look at the conditions in which social work is carried out.
- 5.5.** Since social work is a discipline that is also built on experiential knowledge, SAs will participate, whenever possible, in the training of future social workers.

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Responsible editor: Catherine Bosquet, Bd. Léopold II laan 53,  
1080 Molenbeek-Saint-Jean/Sint-Jans-Molenbeek

[www.comitedevigilance.be](http://www.comitedevigilance.be)  
[info@comitedevigilance.be](mailto:info@comitedevigilance.be)

