



Social Marketing Statement of Ethics Agreed by the iSMA Board in May 2023

The International Social Marketing Association (iSMA)ⁱⁱⁱ adopted this Social Marketing Statement of Ethics to support the ethical conduct of social marketing professionals, including practitioners, scholars and students, in all areas of their professional activities.

The statement is intended to promote conscious engagement with diverse ethical issues arising in social marketing work.

As social marketers we have a duty to observe the highest standards of personal and professional conduct. Behaviour change programmes and projects that seek to influence individuals and communities ideally should be developed and delivered in a way that demonstrates that any potential ethical concerns have been identified, considered and addressed.

We recognise that social marketers working across different social issues and contexts face a diverse range of ethical issues, therefore the principles set out in this paper have been developed to be succinct but also generic enough to be capable of creating a common ethical narrative and shared foundation for all social marketers, identifying potential areas of ethical concern and consider what mitigating actions are necessary.

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The 6 Principles

As social marketers we are committed to the highest standard of personal and professional ethics, guided by the following six social marketing ethical principles:

1. **Respect and sensitivity:** Respect for people's privacy, autonomy, diversity, free and informed choice and rights to participation and non-participation, inclusion and exclusion, and control over their lives.
2. **Social justice and fairness:** Promotion of social justice and avoidance of unfair distribution of benefits and burdens.
3. **Openness and transparency:** Transparency of goals, methods, intended and achieved outcomes, data ownership, and potential or apparent benefits and risks to target group(s) and society.
4. **Avoidance of conflicts of interest:** Avoidance of potential or apparent conflicts of interest, including opportunity for personal and reputational gain or avoidance of loss; promote public trust in social marketing.
5. **Duty of care and nonmaleficence:** Endeavour to do no physical, psychological or environmental harm and exercise a duty of care, integrity and professional and scientific responsibility.
6. **Serve public interest:** Fulfil social and political mandate and identify responsibilities and accountabilities for all stakeholders.

Details:

Principle 1

Respect and sensitivity: Respect for people's privacy, autonomy, diversity, free and informed choice and rights to participation and non-participation, inclusion and exclusion, and control over their lives.

Standards

Social marketers should:

- 1.1 Reflect on their own assumptions, beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours to treat all people with respect and empathy.
- 1.2 Respect and uphold people's right to privacy with understanding and sensitivity.
- 1.3 Consult with people to identify best approaches to overcome exclusion and meet their needs.
- 1.4 Observe and respect the autonomy of individuals, groups, communities and other organisations and work in partnership with them.
- 1.5 Ensure access to social marketing programmes for people who continue engaging in behaviours that negatively affect their health and well-being.
- 1.6 Respect people's desire for non-participation and withdrawal from social marketing programmes at any time.
- 1.7 Acknowledge demographic, experiential and cognitive diversity and approach all types of diversity without prejudice.
- 1.8 Listen to people and support their free and informed choice.
- 1.9 Take steps to provide people with opportunities for participation and inclusion in social marketing programmes.
- 1.10 Recognise and strive for a pluralistic society in which people from various segments are actively involved in solving its problems.

Principle 2

Social justice and fairness: Promotion of social justice and avoidance of unfair distribution of benefits and burdens.

Standards

Social marketers should:

1. Acknowledge that all people are born free and equal in dignity and rights.
2. Recognise that all people vary in their stories, cultures, resources, opportunities, and self-identities.
3. Acknowledge that different people may need different approaches to achieve common or specific goals.

4. Consider the difference between equality and equity in approaches: recognise that equal interventions have the potential of promoting inequity and may themselves be a barrier to achieving common goals.
5. Ensure equitable distribution of resources, including, but not limited to research effort, time and financial support.
6. Establish social marketing goals based upon a broadly shared recognition of a societal problem and collective aspirations.
7. Identify and address inequities in social marketing practice.
8. Engage in social marketing practice without imposing hierarchy or superiority.
9. Provide people with ample opportunity to share their views and provide input in the design of social marketing programmes.
10. Create processes and structures that respect people's time, trust and willingness to participate in social marketing programmes.

Principle 3

Openness and transparency: Transparency of goals, methods, intended and achieved outcomes, data ownership, and potential or apparent benefits and risks to target group(s) and society.

Standards

Social marketers should:

- 3.1 Ensure openness and transparency in the process of setting goals and selecting beneficiaries and stakeholders of social marketing programmes.
- 3.2 Ensure social marketing goals and programmes are informed by input from beneficiaries and stakeholders as well as appropriate primary research, secondary data and evidence reviews.
- 3.3 Be open, clear, and transparent in the communication of predetermined goals of social marketing programmes to all stakeholders.
- 3.4 Identify the duration, level and nature of involvement for all stakeholders in social marketing programmes.
- 3.5 Work to ensure that social marketing programmes are planned, delivered and evaluated in accordance with iSMA and affiliated associations approved professional occupational standards.
- 3.6 Articulate the rationale for the selection of the programme mix.
- 3.7 Articulate the rationale behind methods employed to monitor and evaluate social marketing programmes.
- 3.8 Be open about apparent and potential benefits and risks to social marketing programme stakeholders and wider society.
- 3.9 Ensure contingency plans are considered to ameliorate any potential unintended consequences of social marketing programmes.

3.10 Ensure all data collection and storage protocols are compliant with relevant legal and ethical requirements, and the protocols are subject to regular review.

Principle 4

Avoidance of conflicts of interest: Avoidance of potential or apparent conflicts of interest, including the opportunity for personal and reputational gain or avoidance of loss; promote public trust in social marketing.

Standards

Social marketers should:

- 4.1 Recognise and publicly document any potential conflict of interest, including personal and professional relationships with other stakeholders, before developing and implementing social marketing programmes.
- 4.2 Demonstrate their commitment to the social good in words and actions.
- 4.3 Act in ways that cannot be interpreted as being primarily focused on and driven by outcomes that result in gaining personal and reputational gain or avoidance of loss.
- 4.4 Accurately represent all benefits from participating in social marketing programmes for their organisation.
- 4.5 Respect the resources of all stakeholders and target audiences involved in social marketing programmes.
- 4.6 Report any concerns to their superiors if they believe that the ethicality of a social marketing programme may be compromised.
- 4.7 Promote and advocate for an impartial social marketing profession.
- 4.8 Act in a way that promotes public confidence and trust in social marketing and the social marketing profession.
- 4.9 Provide opportunities for all stakeholders to raise concerns openly as part of routine social marketing programme monitoring and evaluation.

Principle 5

Duty of care and nonmaleficence: Endeavour to do no physical, psychological or environmental harm and exercise a duty of care, integrity and professional and scientific responsibility.

Standards

Social marketers should:

1. Respect notions of harm and benefit from the perspectives of participants and other stakeholders, recognising these concepts have physical, psychological and environmental components.
2. Recognise that notions of harm and benefit vary between individuals, based on factors such as demography, disability, as well as socio-cultural and political contexts.

3. Reflect on the uncertainty that underpins planning and execution of social marketing programmes to avoid or minimise harm, including from unintended consequences.
4. Take steps to avoid or minimise unreasonable risk of harm or injury that can arise through either negligence in planning or the participation in social marketing programmes.
5. Take a precautionary approach to balancing benefits and risks resulting from social marketing programmes, especially when evidence of the impact of an intervention in a given context is lacking.
6. Acknowledge that the perception of urgency for action does not diminish the need to minimise harm.
7. Promote the well-being of those participating or otherwise affected by social marketing programmes.
8. Take a precautionary approach when working with individuals and communities that can be considered as vulnerable.
9. Obtain consent from parents or legal guardians when engaging minors or individuals unable to make free and informed choices regarding social marketing programmes.

Principle 6

Serve public interest: Fulfil social and political mandate and identify responsibilities and accountabilities for all stakeholders.

Standards

Social marketers should:

1. Avoid adopting ideology and actions that are biased against any groups or individuals.
2. Ensure social marketing programmes respect and comply with the restrictions imposed by law, customary law, and codes of conduct agreed at international, national and regional levels.
3. Work to influence and support partners and stakeholders to uphold social rights.
4. Ensure that the ultimate goal of the social marketing programme is good for society.
5. Pursue objectives of societal interest and avoid the use of public resources to satisfy interests of individual stakeholders.
6. Strive to consider the requirements of all the stakeholders, which includes a willingness to explain and justify all actions if necessary.
7. Exercise their profession in a way that identifies and develops the potential strengths of people to facilitate their empowerment.
8. Evaluate the ethicality of a policy and/or social marketing programme before agreeing to develop a programme mix.

9. Facilitate effective and meaningful cooperation with relevant organisations and other entities whose policies or programmes have the same common objective with that of the social marketing programme.
 10. Acknowledge that social marketing programmes may cause unintended consequences and take steps to minimise that risk.
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Notes:

ⁱ In November 2018 the first working group was established to develop the initial statement of ethics, including the 6 principles, on behalf of iSMA, including Krzysztof Kubacki (chair), Diogo Veríssimo (International Social Marketing Association representative), Jim Mintz (Social Marketing Association of North America representative), Dave Ward (Pacific Northwest Social Marketing Association representative), Lynne Eagle (Australia Association of Social Marketing representative), Jeff French (European Social Marketing Association representative), Inés Besada Paullier (Latin American Social Marketing Association representative) and Duncan Musumba (African Social Marketing Association representative).

ⁱⁱ In September 2021 the second working group was established to develop the standards accompanying the initial 6 principles, on behalf of iSMA, including Krzysztof Kubacki (chair), Bilal Akbar, Jackeline Bravo Chamorro, Jeff French, Daisy Lee, Derek Ong Lai Teik, Carla Rodríguez-Sánchez, Diogo Veríssimo and Dave Ward.