2023
State of the Social Service Workforce Report

A DECADE OF PROGRESS, A FUTURE OF PROMISE

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ABOUT THE GLOBAL SOCIAL SERVICE WORKFORCE ALLIANCE

Vision and mission

The Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, referred to as 'the Alliance', works towards a world in which a well-planned, developed and supported social service workforce engages people, structures and organizations to strengthen and build individual, child, family and community well-being and resilience. Our mission is to promote and strengthen the social service workforce to provide services when and where they are most needed, alleviate poverty, challenge and reduce discrimination, promote social justice and human rights, and prevent and respond to violence and family separation.

History

The Alliance was originally conceived during the Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference, in Cape Town, South Africa in 2010, when teams from 18 countries joined together to share experiences and address key challenges facing the social service workforce at a national, regional and global level. The Alliance was proposed to provide ongoing support for and dialogue around effective social service workforce strengthening practices. The Alliance marked its official launch as a network in June 2013.

Structure

The Alliance is an inclusive network of more than 3,500 individual members affiliated with a range of organizations and institutions across 150 countries. A globally representative Steering Committee, composed of 15 members, oversees and guides the direction and development of the Alliance, supported by a small secretariat. The Alliance is currently funded jointly by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), under the Partnerships Plus project implemented by JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc., and by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) through projects at global, regional and national level. The Alliance is a fiscally sponsored project of Tides Center, a U.S. registered 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

State of the Social Service Workforce Reports

The Alliance produced its first annual State of the Social Service Workforce Report in 2015 to shed light on key social service workforce trends and showcase innovative and effective workforce strengthening initiatives. Subsequent reports have since been produced each year, with the exception of 2019, that include both qualitative and quantitative analyses of the workforce and make recommendations for future efforts to strengthen the workforce.

IMPROVING THE WORKFORCE, IMPROVING LIVES.

For more information, please visit www.socialserviceworkforce.org

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ACRONYMS

The Alliance	Global Social Service Workforce Alliance
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CNASR	National College of Social Workers of Romania
EU	European Union
IASSW	International Association of Schools of Social Work
IFSW	International Federation of Social Workers
INGO	International Non-governmental Organization
MGLSD	Uganda Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development
NASWU	Uganda National Association of Social Workers
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
PEPFAR	United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief
REPSSI	Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative
SUNRISE-OVC	Strengthening Uganda's National Response for Implementation of Services for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

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INTRODUCTION

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The Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference: Investing in Those Who Care for Children, held in Cape Town, South Africa in 2010, is often recognized as the launch of a global movement to strengthen the social service workforce and to develop stronger, more effective social service systems. The conference was convened to respond to a global crisis: the number of children subjected to abuse, violence, exploitation and neglect was staggering, yet the workforce charged to care for and protect them was under-resourced and overlooked in government and donor priorities in most countries.[1] The conference brought together 18 country teams drawn from government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), professional associations and higher education institutions.[A] Supported by the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) under the auspices of the technical working group for children orphaned and made vulnerable by HIV/AIDs, the conference provided a platform for these countries to share experiences of the challenges facing the social service workforce and to develop concrete action plans to address them at a national, regional and global level.[2]

Officially launched in 2013, the idea for the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, hereinafter referred to as 'the Alliance', was conceived at the conference to develop and share knowledge and facilitate ongoing support and dialogue for partners and institutions engaged in wider workforce strengthening, especially in low- and middle-income countries. The Alliance's *Social Service Workforce Strengthening Framework*

[A] Countries represented at the conference were: Botswana, Cote D'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Haiti, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Viet Nam, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

was developed and adopted at the conference to provide a multi-faceted range of strategies to enhance the planning, development and support of the social service workforce. It has since been utilized around the world as the key framework to guide workforce strengthening efforts.

To commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Alliance, this year's State of the Social Service Workforce Report examines the evolution of social service workforce strengthening, since the 2010 conference, in the light of the three core pillars of the *Social Service Workforce Strengthening Framework:* **planning, developing** and **supporting.**[B] It identifies significant progress and accomplishments that have been made to strengthen the social service workforce at the global level as well as in three specific countries: Romania, Uganda and Viet Nam.[C] Based on evidence reviewed, the report then identifies remaining and emerging challenges in relation to strengthening the workforce and suggests future initiatives to address them.

Participants at the Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference

[B] This report uses the 2010 Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference solely as a key date from which to examine social service workforce strengthening efforts. It does not intend to claim that all efforts later made at a global or country-level were a direct or indirect result of the conference.

[C] Uganda and Viet Nam were participants of the Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference. Romania was not.

Core Definitions[3]

Social service workforce

The **social service workforce** is an inclusive concept referring to a broad range of governmental and nongovernmental professionals and para professionals who work with children, youth, adults, older persons, families and communities to ensure healthy development and well-being. The social service workforce focuses on preventative, responsive and promotive services that are informed by the humanities and social sciences, Indigenous knowledges, discipline-specific and interdisciplinary knowledge, skills and ethical principles. Social service workers engage people, structures and organizations to do the following: facilitate access to needed services; alleviate poverty; challenge and reduce discrimination; promote social justice and human rights; and prevent and respond to violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect and family separation.

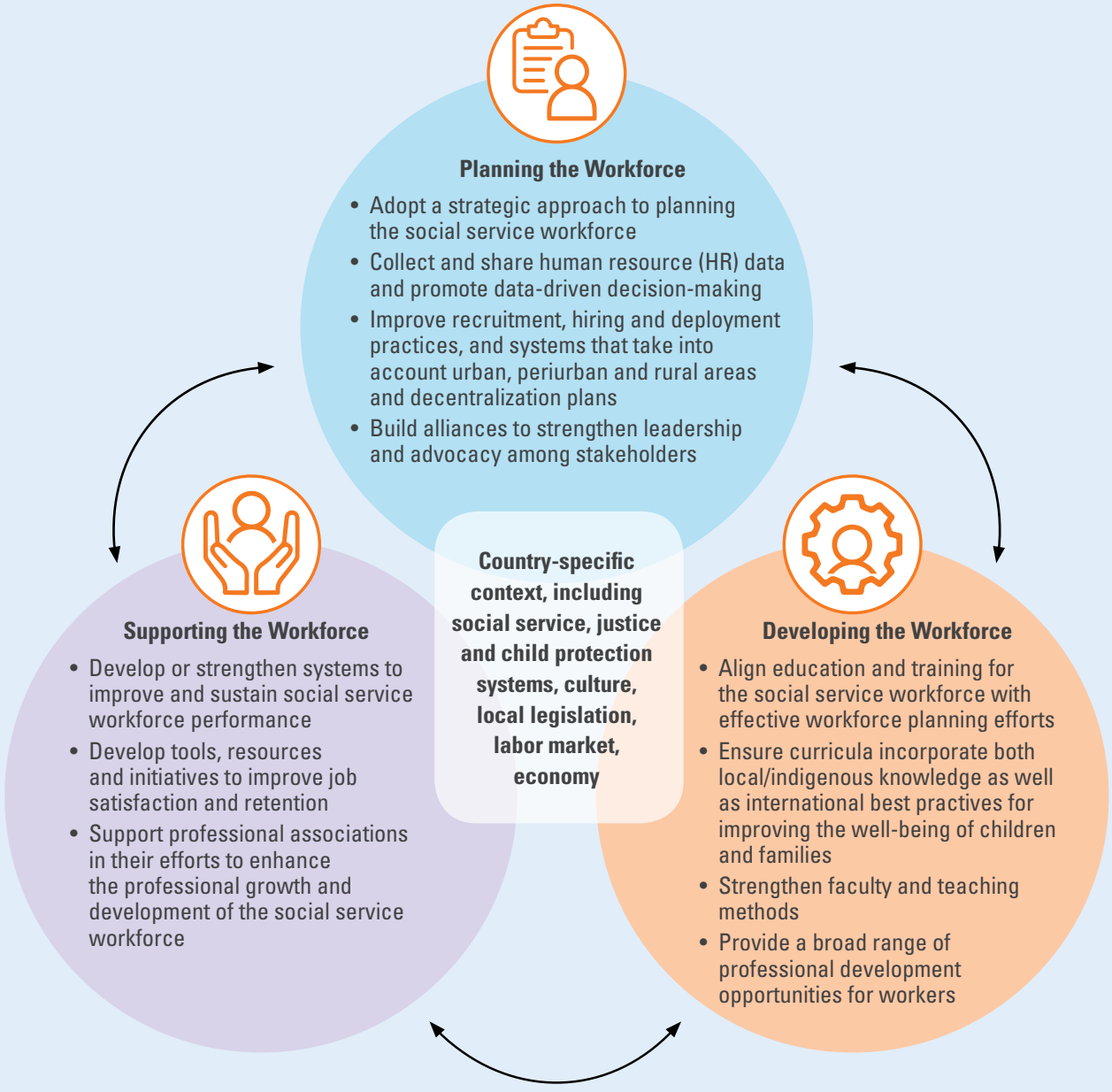
The social service workforce constitutes a broad array of practitioners, researchers, managers and educators, including but not limited to, social workers, social educators, social pedagogues, child care workers, youth workers, child and youth care workers, community development workers/ community liaison officers, community workers, welfare officers, social/cultural animators and case managers. While social work and social pedagogy have the advantage of history and are quite dominant in the sector, other categories of professionals and paraprofessionals have evolved and make invaluable contributions to ensuring human well-being and development.

Social service system

A **social service system,** or a **social welfare system,** is a set of interventions, programs and benefits that are provided by governmental, civil society and community actors to address both the social welfare and protection of vulnerable populations. A functioning social service system serves as a vital safety net for vulnerable populations. When the system is functioning effectively, families and children have access to an array of quality services that promote wellness and protect them from harm. Historically, the social service workforce has played a critical role within social service systems, from the provision of direct services to the administration of government agencies, policy development, research, workforce education and preparation, and advocacy.

Social Service Workforce Strengthening Framework[4]

The *Social Service Workforce Strengthening Framework* was developed and adopted at the Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference. It outlines what are widely considered as the core best practice elements of planning, developing and supporting the workforce. It is intended as a guide to support country efforts to strengthen the social service workforce and systems. The use of any or all of the strategies depends on country context and assessment of the existing national workforce to arrive at the best approach to strengthening it.



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METHODOLOGY

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This report aimed to identify the national and global evolution of strengthening initiatives in the three categories of **planning, developing,** and **supporting** as defined by the *Social Service Workforce Strengthening Framework* and then to evaluate their relevance, sustainability, effectiveness and impact.[D] To answer these questions, key informant interviews, focus groups discussions and a review of literature were conducted.

Recognizing the importance of localizing policy and knowledge,[5] and in line with the social work principles of empowerment and community-led solutions, this report explores the evolution of social service workforce strengthening in three country-specific contexts: Romania, Uganda and Viet Nam. These countries were selected based on their notable investments in, and policy commitments to, social service workforce strengthening over the past decade. They were also selected as each represented a different geographical region, historical context and unique set of challenges, social and economic structures and forms of government.

To inform the case studies, nine key informant interviews were conducted with national experts across the three countries. The national experts were drawn from higher education institutions, government bodies, and civil or professional social service organizations. To identify and examine the evolution of strengthening efforts globally, two focus group discussions were conducted with 16 subject matter and policy experts who have worked across multiple country contexts for 10 or more years.

[D] See Evaluation Questions and Criteria in Annex 1.

2 METHODOLOGY

To triangulate, supplement and expand on the findings of the key informant interviews and focus group discussions, academic and grey literature were reviewed. This consisted namely of academic and peer reviewed literature identified through academic databases with various keyword combinations[E] published in English from 2010 to 2023. Grey literature was identified using the same keywords from internet searches, reference list snowballing, the Alliance's resource database, UNICEF's resource database, and from queries to key informants and focus group discussants. A total of 121 articles, resources, reports and manuals were reviewed.

Using the Analysis Framework[F] developed for this report, data were analyzed thematically and categorized using the three primary categories of the *Social Service Workforce Strengthening Framework* (*planning, developing* and *supporting* the workforce). To develop each country case study, notes were synthesized and analyzed for themes across all three key informant interviews. These themes were then further triangulated with available academic and grey literature on the social service workforce in that country. To identify international accomplishments, progress and themes, notes were synthesized and analyzed from the focus group discussions. To identify emerging themes and recommendations, the case studies, focus group themes and literature were triangulated using both thematic analysis and content analysis.

Limitations: While the research for this report was able to cover a wide range of evidence on the evolution of social service workforce strengthening since 2010, the process of developing the report also faced certain limitations. Case studies and international themes were mostly informed by the perspective of key informants and focus group discussants (a total of 25 individuals). While each of these individuals are national or international subject matter and/or policy experts on the social service workforce, they alone are not sufficient in number or diversity to be representative of the whole workforce or social service sector globally. The extensive review of academic and grey literature from multiple country contexts does partially offset this limitation. Nonetheless, the case studies and analysis of international themes, which these interviews and discussions informed, must be seen as primarily illustrative. While the case studies provide an in-depth narrative, they cannot represent all aspects of a country's social service system and social service workforce, which are inherently intertwined with politics, history and social pressures, and beyond the scope of this report. Furthermore, while a wide range of academic and grey literature was reviewed to triangulate data and inform key learnings, academic literature in social sciences is still dominated by scholars and institutions from predominantly Western and high-income countries.[6] Lastly, while data were collected that highlight the role that the Alliance has played, this report is not an impact evaluation on the Alliance's work, even though certain key examples are included to highlight ways where the Alliance has made a particularly significant contribution.

[E] Keywords included 'social services', 'social work' or 'social welfare' and 'strengthening', 'initiatives', 'education' or 'policy.'

[F] See Annex 3.

3

The Evolution of Strengthening the Social Service Workforce: CASE STUDIES

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The first section presents the in-depth case studies of social service workforce strengthening in Romania, Uganda and Viet Nam. They highlight achievements since 2010, when the landmark Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference was held, while also noting roadblocks experienced along the way. In no way do they cover all strengthening efforts or all factors that have impacted the social service workforce in that country. The case studies are based on certain key achievements and challenges highlighted directly by the key informants. The key informants' perspectives were then triangulated and supplemented with reference material through the literature review.

If key informants mentioned something that could not be validated it was either not included or specifically noted that it was shared by a key informant and not validated with/by other sources. The 2010 Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference is referred to as a key date and useful starting point from which to examine social service workforce strengthening efforts. However, there is no intention to imply that the workforce strengthening efforts examined in these case studies should be seen as either a direct or indirect result of that conference, unless that is a connection that has been specifically noted.

Romania

> **One of the most impactful initiatives [in Romania] has been developing the Professional Code…it's important for social workers and for the employers. It sets the standards, the methods, the techniques and training. It defines what it means to be a social worker.**
>
> ***— Diana Cristea, President, National College of Social Workers Romania***

The social service workforce in Romania tells a story of rebirth. Social work in Romania can be traced back several centuries. However, in the 42 years of communist rule that followed the Second World War, social work in Romania was dismantled and ultimately forbidden. After the communist government collapsed in 1989, Romania rebuilt its political, social and economic structures, from the ground up. How the social service workforce has evolved since, provides a hopeful message that significant progress can be made, even from a very low base, and that rebuilding and strengthening the social service workforce, against such a historical background, is possible.

Historical context

Romania has a long-recorded tradition of social services, dating back to charitable efforts by religious leaders in the 14th century.[7] The first social policy[G] was documented as early as the 16th century.[8] In the 18th century, social assistance organizations proliferated, and the government adopted a child protection law.

[G] During this time, authorization cards were created permitting only those with disabilities to beg while requiring able-bodied individuals to work to receive assistance.

It also marked the beginning of a transition from social assistance being primarily delivered by religious organizations to being delivered by the government.[9] After the country gained independence in 1918, formal social services were developed and social work developed as a profession. The Ministry of Labour, Health, and Social Welfare was established in 1920; the first school of social work was established in 1929; and by the early 1940s social work had grown enough that the Ministry had to be divided into three distinct offices.[10] Following World War II, all of this was dismantled by the newly positioned communist regime, as it was believed that poverty and other social problems would not exist under communism, and therefore, there was no need for social work. By 1969, social work was completely forbidden.

The rebirth of social work began after the collapse of communism in 1989, when international attention was drawn to the conditions of Romanian children in orphanages as a result of the communist legacy of institutionalization.[11] This led to a flood of financial and technical resources from United Nations (UN) organizations, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and other development partners, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Bank.[12] This process of rebuilding started with a nearly non-existent social service workforce—in 1992 it was estimated that there were only 200 social workers in the entire country.[13] With the initial focus on child protection reform, the Department of Child Protection was established and later expanded to include other vulnerable groups. NGOs and international partners served as major implementing partners, created new models of services, and helped to hire a new cadre of social workers.[14] Rebuilding also included the re-establishment of social work education—four major universities began offering social work programs,[15] with the first set of graduates matriculating in 1994.[16] Educational opportunities expanded to the wider social service workforce in 2003 when several part-time, distance learning and vocational training programmes were developed.[17]

A legal framework for the social service workforce was established in 2004 under *Law No. 466: Regarding the Status of Social Workers.* It defined the role of social workers to "provide assistance to individuals or communities"[18] and set the minimum qualifications for the profession as holding a social work diploma.[19] It also established the National College of Social Workers of Romania (CNASR) as both the national regulatory body for the profession and as the national association for social work professionals.[20] A *Code of Ethics* outlining the practice standards for social workers was adopted in 2008.[21]

Timeline of key events in social service workforce strengthening in Romania[22]

- **1775** — First *Child Protection Law*
- **1831-1832** — Regulations formally established social assistance
- **1920** — Ministry of Labour, Health, and Gender is established
- **1929** — First university education in social work begins
- **1940s** — Ministry of Labour, Health, and Social Welfare divided into 3 distinct departments
- **1947** — Start of communist rule
- **1952** — Social work education downgraded from university level to a post-high school vocational program
- **1969-1990** — Social work education forbidden
- **1989** — Fall of communist regime
- **1994** — First new cadre of social work graduates complete 4-year university program
- **1997** — Child protection system reform begins
- **2004** — *Law No. 272: Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights* and *Law No. 466: Status of Social Workers* are adopted
- **2008** — The National College of Social Workers of Romania (CNASR) publishes *Social Work Code of Ethics*
- **2011** — *Law No. 292: Social Assistance Law* creates framework for the national social service system
- **2012** — *Law No. 197: Quality Assurance in the Domain of Social Services* establishes accreditation and licensing regulations.
- **2013** — *Law No. 257* amends and completes *Law No. 272* regarding the protection and promotion of children's rights
- **2014** — *National Strategy for the Promotion and Protection of Children's Rights 2014-2020* is adopted
- **2015** — *National Strategy on Social Inclusion and Poverty 2015-2020* is adopted
- **2016** — CNASR establishes Social Work Research Commission
- **2019** — *Professional Code* for social service workers adopted and disseminated
- **2022** — First doctoral program in social work starts at University of Bucharest; *National Strategy on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction 2022-2027* adopted
- **2023** — *National Strategy for the Promotion and Protection of Children's Rights 2022-2027* and *National Action Plan for the implementation of the Child Guarantee* adopted

Composition of the social service workforce

While most legislation and strengthening initiatives in Romania have focused on the country's 12,000 registered social workers, there is also a broader social service workforce comprised of professional specialists, para professionals and volunteers.[23] The non-social work 'specialists' are those who work at social service agencies with professional qualifications in a different field of study. The para professionals who work in social services are those that have no formal education in social services but do have some type of job function and related training. Volunteers' roles are not defined but volunteers are often recruited and trained to make up for staff shortages.[24]

In 2018, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) issued a regional call to action to define and align the functions, competencies and qualifications of each cadre of the social service workforce across Europe and Central Asia.[25] However, these definitions and workforce framework have not yet been fully adopted in Romania. Social services and the social service workforce are administered at national, county and local levels by a range of ministries, agencies and offices. Across Romania, the General Directorates for Social Work and Child Protection are the primary employers of social workers, while NGOs employ the remaining 20 per cent of all registered social workers.[26]

Progress and achievements in social service workforce strengthening: 2010 to present

Romania made significant progress in social service workforce strengthening in 20 years following the collapse of communism from 1990-2010. Key achievements in strengthening the social service workforce in Romania since 2010 are described below and categorized according to the *Social Service Workforce Strengthening Framework*.[27]

Planning

Romania's efforts to plan for the social service workforce have largely taken the form of regulatory actions. These have codified a range of important aspects needed to rebuild the workforce. Following

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the legislation adopted in the early 2000s, several new laws, amendments and policy documents have helped create a robust legal framework. The *Social Assistance Law* in 2011 set the framework for the national social service system: it required local public administrative units to provide public social work services, outlined social work activities in rural communities, organized and described the types of social services to be provided, and set a "ratio of one social worker to a maximum of 300 beneficiaries".[28]

The 2012 *Quality Assurance Law,* passed through effective advocacy by CNASR, made service providers' accreditation and funding contingent on employing a qualified social worker.[29] This led to a wide range of services requiring licensed social workers, which then increased the demand for social workers. The *National Strategy for the Promotion and Protection of Children's Rights 2014-2020* and the *National Strategy on Social Inclusion and Poverty 2015-2020* underscored that progress in advancing children's rights and reducing poverty could only be made with a strong social service workforce. The strategies outlined the need for plans to address key human resource issues, which included salaries, recruitment and increasing social service staff in rural communities,[30] where close to 50 per cent of Romania's population lives.[31] Toward that end, the government funded a national program to supplement social work salaries and provide incentives for social workers to move to rural communities.[32]

Developing

To develop Romania's social service workforce, and build its capacity, efforts have focused on improving the quality, reach and offerings of universities, expanding training opportunities, and increasing professional regulation. There has been considerable work to expand access to diploma and degree programs for social service workers. A successful first cohort matriculated from the University of Bucharest's 3-year community college social work program in 2008[33] and subsequently inspired the development of other programmes over the next several years.[34] To develop the skills of recent graduates, CNASR signed an agreement in 2012 with all university social work programmes allowing their graduates to register free of charge with the association.[35] This systematized and expanded Romania's professional regulation system. There have also been wider efforts to increase the range of in-service professional development opportunities, which included giving para professional and home caregivers opportunities to attend training sessions provided by accredited institutions.[36]

Another way the social service workforce developed was through an increase in social work research and scholarship. In 2012, for the first time, full-time professor positions in Romania began to be occupied by former Romanian social work students who were permitted to supervise doctoral students.[37] This later paved the way for the recent commencement of the country's first doctoral program in social work. By the end of the decade, there were 20 universities offering 38 distinct social work and social work specialization programs across the country with close to 3,000 places for students.[38] In 2016, CNASR established the Social Work Research Commission, which over the next several years commissioned several studies. This increase in research provided evidence to decisionmakers to help "improve the working conditions of social workers as well as the quality of services provided."[39] In 2019, one of the surveys the Commission conducted, in collaboration with UNICEF, was a national survey of registered social workers on practice behaviours, from which nine core competencies emerged to ensure a baseline quality of service delivery to clients.[40] In line with the European Union policy, which has long stressed competency frameworks to increase the competitiveness of Europe's job market, there has been an increasing interest at the European level in seeing that Romania is able to define competencies and increase competency standards for social work education.[41]

Supporting

To support Romania's social service workforce, there has been progress toward defining standards, building associations and improving recognition of the workforce. Driven by findings from the 2019 competency study, CNASR adopted a *Professional Code* for the social service workforce.[42] The code details the skills and competencies required for

each of the four levels of social work—beginner, practitioner, specialist and principal—that were established in the 2004 *Law on Social Work* and for different types of interventions.[43] These standards support the professional growth and development of the social service workforce and help to increase the quality of services, and subsequently, the recognition of the profession. These standards and professional levels have helped to develop viable career ladders for workers and to mobilize support for them among employers and funders. Another aspect which supported the professional development of social workers was the agreement between the CNASR and university social work programmes in 2012, which in addition to facilitating professional regulation, or 'credentialing', also helped strengthen the association. CNASR has run several campaigns to boost the visibility of the social work profession, which has faced a lack of understanding from both lawmakers and the public. Initiatives have included an annual national gala during social work month and a 'stand up for social work' campaign that included meetings with representatives from 30 of Romania's 42 counties.[44] These campaigns contributed to increases in policymakers citing research and evidence from CNASR to advance social protection regulations.[45]

The road ahead: Challenges and priorities for the next decade

While there has been clear progress to plan, develop and support the social service workforce in Romania, there have also been setbacks in each of these areas.

Planning initiatives have demonstrated foresight and strategy and established key standards; however, the implementation of these has lagged. While the law requires social service providers to recruit and retain qualified social workers, if an agency cannot do so, the law simultaneously permits other employees, even if they do not have formal social service training, to perform the tasks a social worker would do.[46] Thus, despite a standard stipulating a certain level of training, many service provider roles are performed by untrained staff. A 2013 study found that only one third of social service staff have a degree related to social services.[47] Further, despite the initiatives to increase access to social work in rural communities, there still remain significant inequities in the type and quality of services available in rural communities.[48] While the 2011 *Social Assistance Law* required local administrative units to set up public social services, as of 2018, the service coverage for rural administrative units was found to be only 28 per cent, compared with coverage for urban

administrative units at 80 per cent.[49] The incentive programs to attract social workers to rural communities have not seen a large uptake.[50] Subsequently, the social work departments in rural communes often cannot be accredited as a public provider due to their inability to attract and retain a qualified social worker.[51] Another challenge translating plans to reality has been in trying to meet an established benchmark ratio for the number of social workers to cases. There is a major deficit in the number of social workers. In 2018, CNASR estimated a nation-wide shortfall of 20,000 social workers.[52] In 2023, the first social service workforce census conducted in Romania identified that the ratio of social workers was below the targeted ratio in more than 50 per cent of localities.[53] This has led to an overarching challenge of high caseloads, which constrains the quality of services provided.[54]

To fill these positions and develop a robust workforce, Romania will have to grapple with its looming labour shortage. There is a shrinking student population limiting the possible number of new social workers, and also an ageing population with increasing needs for social care services.[55] Some universities are carrying out recruitment drives at high schools and social media campaigns to promote the profession, but with only one in five social work graduates actually pursuing a career in the field, increasing university enrolment will not be enough to fill the gap.[56] Further, the lack of standardized curriculum in social work degree programs makes it difficult to ensure students are taught and master the same set of competencies.[57] For graduates of social work programmes, there are discrepancies in the availability of social service jobs. University staff frequently hear about employers who

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cannot fill social worker positions as the economy has tightened and more lucrative employment options are available elsewhere in Europe, which make the low salaries and stress of social service jobs less attractive. However, simultaneously, University staff frequently hear about social work graduates who cannot find suitable jobs. Amongst the current social service workforce staff, a range of skills training challenges need to be tackled. A review of the workforce identified several training gaps, which include assessment methods, prevention and intervention strategies, communication, interpersonal and leadership skills, goal setting and teamwork.[58] Further, historically the availability and uptake of continuing education for professional specialists, para professionals and volunteers has been quite low and there is little evidence that this will be a priority in future efforts.[59] Lastly, due to staffing shortages, offices have been engaging volunteers, but without clear guidance or oversight on the qualifications of volunteers or available training options.[60]

Romania's efforts to implement standards, improve the quality of services and support social service workforce staff have been hampered, in part, by weaknesses in the regulatory oversight structure. Despite a law requiring credentialing and a system to facilitate it, there is no penalty or enforcement mechanism.[61]

Previous oversight and enforcement attempts have faltered. A social inspections body was created under the Ministry of Labour; however, inadequate staffing led to a lack of capacity for site visits and oversight.[62] This body was also critiqued as not being fully independent, being situated at ministerial level and not under the scrutiny of parliament.[63] The dual structure of the CNASR, tasked as both the credentialing (professional regulation) and advocacy entity, has also been criticized with concerns that it cannot effectively perform both roles.[64] Further, most social workers report low salaries and low job satisfaction, with more than one quarter reporting that they have experienced burnout and nearly half reporting that their personal safety had been threatened while performing the duties of their job.[65] As such, there is reported high staff turnover, and close to 40 per cent of surveyed workers have reported contemplating leaving their position.[66]

Despite these challenges, the numbers show progress: Romania started with roughly 200 social workers in the 1990s; thirty years later, the country boasts more than 12,000 registered social workers.[67] Regardless of the roadblocks that remain ahead, the evolution of social service workforce in Romania is a comeback story.

Uganda

> **One thing that I'm very sure [about] is that, by developing a National Framework for Social Care and Support, and strengthening the social service workforce, Uganda, has laid a very strong foundation upon which the social service workforce strengthening drive is going to be built.**
>
> ***— Irene Achom Oluka, Child Protection Officer, UNICEF Uganda***

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Innovation and partnership-building lie at the centre of Uganda's efforts to strengthen the social service workforce. Most efforts have been led by the Government of Uganda's Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development (MGLSD) with support from UNICEF, the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance and other development partners.[68] Since 2010, these efforts have focused on inclusive and thorough systems building as the foundation of success. This collaborative process has led to several significant accomplishments including: critical assessments to identify focus areas of strengthening efforts; the development of national training and procedures for child protection and case management; the creation of a competency framework for para social workers and standards of social work education; and the development of a national framework and accompanying operational framework for strengthening the social service workforce.

Historical context

The value base of the social service workforce in Uganda is underpinned by the African concept of *Ubuntu,* which encompasses and describes the values of interconnectedness, community and care.[69] This tradition and philosophy created networks of reciprocity, mutual support, intergenerational respect, and an overarching emphasis on collective well-being. During the formal colonial era from 1884 to 1962, social work was introduced through administrative and missionary work and imposed Western values and systems of social care above *Ubuntu.*[70] Professional social work training began in 1952 at the Nsamizi Training Institute for Social Development which was focused on training local staff to work in the colonial government's social programs.[71] In the early years of Uganda gaining independence, training programs grew—the social welfare, administration and community development training programme was established at the Makerere University in 1963 and the first degree program in social work was established in 1969.[72] Training efforts continued to expand with growing numbers of universities starting degree programs; however, it was policy analysis and planning in the early 2000s that became a critical launching point for the development of social services and the social service workforce. A 2002 child protection assessment informed the adoption of the 2004 *Policy on Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children* and its accompanying five-year *National Strategic Programme Plan of Interventions*.[73] These policy documents and their subsequent revisions have provided some of the key legal backing that has contributed to social service workforce strengthening.

Timeline of key events in social service workforce strengthening in Uganda

- **1952** Nsamizi Training Institute for Social Development founded
- **1962** Uganda gains independence from Great Britain
- **1963** Makerere University establishes training social welfare, administration and community development program
- **1969** First social work degree program begins at Makerere University
- **2004** *Policy on Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children* and first *National Strategic Programme Plan of Interventions* adopted
- **2010** Systems analysis on the implementation of the *Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children Policy* is conducted
- **2011** Second *National Strategic Programme Plan of Interventions* is adopted, implementing several case management improvements
- **2012** The SUNRISE OVC programme develops Professional Certificate Course in Child Protection, which ultimately trains 11,000 para social workers
- **2013** National mapping of the existing child protection system is conducted, highlighting the critical role of para social workers
- **2015** *National Social Protection Policy* is adopted, emphasizes comprehensive social care
- **2018** First National Symposium on Social Work celebrates success while also calling for improved planning
- **2019** Functional review of the government-supported social service workforce is conducted
- **2020** *National Child Policy* defines social service workforce
- **2022** *National Framework for Strengthening the Social Service Workforce* is developed
- **2023** *Operational Framework for Social Care and Support* is developed and under review

Composition of the social service workforce

The social service workforce in Uganda is diverse, operating across sectors and delivering services at different levels of care.[74] It includes those working for the government, I/NGOs as well as para professionals and volunteers.[75] The terminology of the social service workforce remains relatively new with the first formal definition, which mirrors the Alliance definition, included in the 2020 *National Child Policy.*[76]

Government employees are often the most recognized members of the social service workforce. They include Probation and Social Welfare Officers, Community Development Officers, Rehabilitation Officers, Labour Officers, and youth detention workers. They also include medical social workers; those working in refugee and humanitarian services; and those working in police, child and family protection units.[77] Largely the roles of the social service workforce are "embedded within various social protection-related laws, policies, regulations and guidelines [and] in most …there is no specific mention or full explanation of the role of the social service workforce".[78] The Ministry of Public Service has the primary mandate over all civil servants across departments, including social service staff. The MGLSD, however, has the primary mandate for social care and support services and must ensure that the workforce is coordinated across different sectors.[79] Most social service workers are employed by I/NGOS and have an even more diverse set titles of titles;[80] however, there is no legal or coordinating structure that covers the social service workforce in I/NGOs nor is there a way of collecting data from them.[81]

Progress and achievements in social service workforce strengthening: 2010 to present

The key achievements in strengthening the social service workforce in Uganda are described below and categorized according to the *Social Service Workforce Strengthening Framework.*[82]

Planning

Uganda has taken a strategic approach to building national social welfare systems, viewing it as a human right and basic service, and subsequently planning for a strong social service workforce to effectively deliver

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these services.[83] The Ugandan Constitution creates an overarching legal framework to provide services to "protect children and vulnerable persons against any form of abuse, harassment or ill-treatment".[84] The government has taken several steps to analyze and identify the composition and capacity of the social service workforce. In 2010, the MGLSD conducted a systems analysis on the implementation of the *Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children Policy*[85] and from that, in 2011 launched a second five-year *National Strategic Programme Plan of Interventions*.[86] It mandated regular reporting of case management, strengthened the information system by providing data on reach and coverage, and eventually led to the development of a national manual and training for case management.[87] In 2013, UNICEF supported the MGLSD to do a national mapping of the existing child protection systems. The mapping revealed that the social service workforce needed critical attention and that community-based para social workers were a critical part of service delivery, especially in rural communities.[88]

In response, the government has made a concerted effort at strategic planning. In 2015, Uganda published its first *National Social Protection Policy Plan,* which anchored the importance of having a comprehensive plan for effective social services.[89] In 2018, the first National Symposium on Social Work[H] identified the need for greater planning, including a legal mechanism to regulate the social service workforce.[90] In 2019, a functional review of the government-supported social service workforce was conducted to provide an in-depth understanding of the skills, standards and capacity that national planning efforts needed to address.[91]

In 2022, in collaboration with MGLSD, the Alliance facilitated the development of a *National Framework for Strengthening the Social Service Workforce*.[92] An accompanying *Operational Framework*—built around legislation, institutional capacity, services, coordination, evaluation and data, quality assurance and financing—has also been developed, which if approved and implemented, will provide a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach to plan for the workforce at all levels.[93] As part of the development of the *Operational Framework,* all social service workforce job descriptions were reviewed and subsequently revised as needed.[94] Supervision guidelines and service delivery standards were also developed.[95] The process also involved an assessment of the human resource system to identify human resource requirements to carry out national plans.[96] What has underpinned these various processes has been collaboration. Key informants emphasized that they have all been done in partnership, through a model that brings together different actors, including government, UN organizations (led by UNICEF), development partners (notably USAID), academia, social work professional bodies and practitioners.[97] This approach has helped to build alliances, increase trust and dialogue, and ultimately, improve advocacy for stronger legislation and increased, more effective resource allocation.

[H] Planned by MGLSD, in coordination with the Alliance and the International Federation Social Work.

Alliance contribution to social service workforce strengthening in Uganda: Developing a national framework and equipping social service workers to be advocates

The Global Social Service Workforce Alliance has worked alongside the Government of Uganda, NGOs, NASWU and universities to strengthen Uganda's social service workforce in various capacities. In 2018, with support from UBS Optimus Foundation, GHR Foundation and USAID, the Alliance helped conceptualize and plan Uganda's first National Symposium on Social Work and Social Service. The summit brought together 100 multi-sectoral actors to discuss and plan social service workforce strengthening efforts in the areas of child protection and care reform. The event revealed strong support for the standardization of social work training and regulation of the social work and para professional workforce in Uganda, where at the time, only 2 per cent of those practicing social work in the country were fully qualified as social workers. The symposium ultimately resulted in the development of a national task team, led by MGLSD, which carried forth specified efforts to strengthen the workforce.

In 2020, in coordination with UNICEF, the Alliance supported the Government of Uganda to develop the *National Framework for Strengthening the Social Service Workforce* and accompanying *Operational Framework*.

In 2019, the Alliance worked with the National Child Protection Working Group in Uganda to pilot a media and advocacy training program. The training equipped 20 frontline social service providers on how to work with the media to address violence against children. Additionally, 11 journalists from local media were sensitized on reporting on issues affecting children and how to work with social service providers to inform and educate the public on such issues.

Developing

One of the most critical evolutions in developing the social service workforce in Uganda has been developing forms of social service practice that reflect Ugandan values, knowledge and context. There is growing literature on the imperative of indigenization and a recognition that continuing to exclusively promote Euro-American social work practices in other contexts is a form of professional imperialism.[98] As a result, there has been an intentional effort to ensure social work practices are centered in local knowledge, voices and models.[99]

The embodiment of these processes has meant rejecting the Euro-American model of social work that is largely based on a "remedial welfare model",[100] and instead, employing a social development approach that emphasizes policy interventions and social change.[101] Ugandan social service workers described this indigenized approach as "underpinned by the desire to liberate people from oppression and restore human dignity"[102] and a philosophy that is "mutual, collective, and rendered to preserve life and in the interest of the community."[103]

At a training level, institutions have been critically reflecting on how social work students are trained, on the sources of knowledge and theories that are being used for training, and how learning outcomes are assessed.[104] One example has been the creation of an African Spiritually Sensitive Practice Theory to equip social work students to practice effectively in a context where spirituality is a strong influence in most communities.[105] There have also been deliberate efforts to develop local research and publications, recognizing that training institutions cannot solely use

foreign research findings to produce graduates that are suitable for the local labour market and national development needs.[106] The Promotion of Professional Social Work in East Africa Programme, for example, among other initiatives, has worked to increase the availability of research by Africans.[107] How field placements are structured has also been assessed, and a field education pilot has begun that entails placing students in a community without being tied to a formal organization, with the goal of having students tap more directly into local priorities and indigenous forms of problem solving, unhampered by the frameworks and funding dictated by employing organizations.[108]

One of the key challenges originally noted by the Uganda team during the 2010 Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference was an inadequate number of workers.[109] Specific initiatives focused on expanding and improving workforce training have helped improve the recruitment and deployment of workers at both professional and para professional levels. Social work education programs have expanded, and as of 2021, there were two universities offering master's degrees in social work and 22 offering bachelor's degrees (along with a handful offering bachelor's degrees in specialized social welfare areas), making Uganda the leader in the number of social service education programs in East Africa.[110] There has also been an effort to ensure that field education placements and available supervision are increasing at the same rates as university social work enrolment. Further, Uganda has worked to increase the availability of flexible and remote pre-service education and in-service training programs. One example is the Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI) Certificate Programme, which has been implemented in various African countries to increase the competencies of carers for vulnerable children. This programme has a high completion rate for students and an evaluation found that there have been positive benefits of using a distance-educational model.[111]

One particularly significant area of progress has been the use of clearly defined professional competencies to develop appropriate social work education and training programs. In 2018, 19 universities joined with practitioners and policymakers to review the social work education curriculum. This process resulted in the development of the *Minimum Standards and Competency Framework for Social Work Education,* which were implemented across all Ugandan Bachelor of Social Work programs.[112] Currently, through the Inter-University Council for East Africa, higher education institutions in Uganda are working with universities across East Africa to achieve even greater consistency in social work education by developing regional benchmarks for Bachelor of Social Work programs.[113] Further, in 2022, a competency framework was developed for frontline social service staff in order to develop minimum standards for skills and knowledge for each role, streamline assessments of performance and support recruitment.[114]

Uganda has made significant strides in the development of the para professional workforce. The para social work system was developed over a decade ago in recognition of the low ratios of professional social workers to vulnerable children.[115] Of particular note, the PEFAR-funded SUNRISE-OVC (Strengthening Uganda's National Response for Implementation of Services for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children) programme, in partnership with the MGLSD, worked to formalize and improve the skills of para social workers through a practice-oriented Professional Certificate Course in Child Protection, and over five years trained 11,000 workers.[116]

Supporting

To support the social service workforce, efforts in Uganda over the past decade have focused on strengthening associations and working to advocate for the increased growth and professional development of the workforce.

In Uganda, there are a few professional groups that support some of the key cadres of the social service workforce, including the Uganda Counselling Association, the Palliative Care Association of Uganda, and most notably, the Uganda National Association of Social Workers (NASWU).[117] The NASWU has worked to set standards of social work practice, promote social work education, enhance professional

supervision, promote collaboration, mobilize resources and advocate for development of the profession. The NASWU played an important role in 2020 in advocating on behalf of the social service workforce. In response to the President of Uganda's disparaging remarks about the value of social workers, the president of NASWU, Michael Byamukama, issued a letter to the president reiterating the importance of the social service workforce in its role of advocating "for millions of people every day, and in the process, [ensuring that] many people who would otherwise suffer… have hope and motivation to succeed."[118]

NASWU has also been working with government partners on a system to regulate the social service workforce. Different policy commitments, including the 2020 *National Child Policy,* have referred to the need for accreditation and licensing of social service workforce professionals through the NASWU, as a key part of social service workforce strengthening strategies. Since 2010, several efforts have been made towards providing a regulatory framework for the social service workforce, including the development of an issues paper by NASWU in 2015.[119] Further, NASWU is in the final stages of developing a formal working memorandum of understanding with the MGLSD, which would accelerate efforts toward establishing a social service workforce council.[120]

The road ahead: Challenges and priorities for the next decade

One of the foundational challenges facing the social service workforce is that Uganda is not a welfare state so there is no streamlined welfare system nor defined set of welfare benefits. There is also an absence of public social protection mechanisms. As a result, most Ugandans rely on informal care through relational networks of extended families and communities.[121] While this value of mutual care is foundational, the lack of a more formalized system has several negative effects. Despite the adoption of certain policies and frameworks, there is still no overarching legal framework for the social service workforce, but rather a fragmented set of laws relating to specific populations.[122] In the *Operational Framework for Strengthening the Social Service Workforce,* the government's self-assessment is that the existing structure is "patchy, limited in scope and coverage, and mainly provided by non-state actors with support from development partners."[123] Contributing to this is the fact that nearly 70 per cent of the social service workforce are employed by NGOs, yet the NGOs are not monitored by the government and there is little coordinated planning.[124] The lack of an overarching legal framework and the resulting decentralized system weakens social services and the social service workforce.[125] It contributes to strained reporting lines and duplication of efforts.[126] It also contributes to confusion about what services are needed, who will deliver them and what qualifications are required.[127] This makes it difficult for the community to recognize the value of social service workers and also translates into lower investment of government funds.[128]

The lack of state funding and resources is significant. It leads to a heavy reliance on community-based organizations, which can be effective but only if trained and supported to coordinate with other service providers. It also leads to a heavy reliance on development partners, which contributes to the already-existing power imbalances and creates a strong "bias of development partners determining the priorities."[129] Service commissions, a legal framework, and a regulating body or council would all go a long way in addressing these issues.

While there have been high enrolment rates at universities, they have not always been able to provide quality field education, which is critical to ensure that students are not just learning theory but also the competencies needed for practice. Uganda's Capacity Building and Training Programme for Para Social Workers was forward-thinking and successful, but there is still a lack of an overarching training system for the entire workforce. Specifically for government social service workers, there is a significant lack of in-service training. A 2021 USAID-funded study found that most Probation and Social Welfare Officers and Community Development Officers had not received any formal orientation into their roles and that capacity building was not viewed as a priority and often not funded.[130]

Further, while effort has been put into developing and relying on locally-produced curriculum, there is a long way to go, with large structural barriers to overcome, in achieving this objective. A comparative case study found that in several East African countries, the number of African authors used in the curriculum was highest at Uganda's Makerere University, but still accounted for less than four per cent of the teaching materials used.[131] There has been an increase in research in East African universities, but with precedence in academia placed on journal articles, most research is published in international journals and targeted to an international audience. Not only are such journal articles less suitable as teaching materials, with expensive subscriptions, the journals are often not accessible in the first place.[132]

The social service workforce in Uganda is significantly under-resourced. Staff have high caseloads, are largely underpaid, and often do not have the resources required to do their jobs—they frequently lack transport or travel reimbursements for home visits or basic facilities to meet with clients.[133] The pay and support for para professionals is particularly low, with turnover being high.[134] There is confusion in the supervision structure since technical supervision and administrative supervision come from two different offices, which weakens accountability and follow-through.[135] There is also no standard system for continuous professional development for workers.[136] These challenges severely

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negate successful planning and developing efforts. As one expert commented you can "try to build some systems, but the system will not function unless it is adequately resourced…[even] if you just keep injecting money in training…[and]…in developing policies… if you're not financing that service then you…won't see the change that you want to see."[137] This creates a vicious cycle: the lack of funding makes it difficult for the social service workforce to effectively do their jobs, which results in poor outcomes, which makes it difficult to justify further investment. Further, historically many practitioners have not been aware of or participated in the NASWU, which has weakened capacity and the ability to advocate for policies and set up structures like a service commission.[138] While it seems closer to actualization, given NASWU and MGLSD's recent discussions, the lack of a regulatory body to enforce service practice and delivery standards still hampers strengthening efforts.[139]

These challenges are not insignificant but the commitment to partnership, innovation and authenticity in Uganda creates a compelling path forward. Building a foundation is hard, but that is exactly what has been accomplished in the past decade in strengthening the social service workforce in Uganda.

Viet Nam

> **Many localities have taken proactive and determined actions to implement social work development programs within their regions. As a result, the number of people in need of social assistance who can access and benefit from social work services has been steadily increasing.**
>
> ***— To Duc, Director General, Department of Social Protection, Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs***

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As the legal framework for developing social work in Viet Nam was only adopted in 2010, Viet Nam's experience is an incredible story of what can be achieved with a concerted effort. There has been significant progress to plan and develop the social service workforce. Key accomplishments include the legal recognition of social work as a profession, the development of social service centres and units across the country, increases in the role of social services in critical fields (such as social welfare, health and education), and the continued expansion and development of the social work education system.

Historical context

At the start of the 20th century, as a French colony, Viet Nam's social services mirrored the French system of charity through religious organizations.[140] Social work development took different paths when the country was divided into two. In the North, the former Ministry of Social Relief, which would later become the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, followed communist decrees[I] on social relief and promoted values such as mutual care between families and community members.[141] In the South, professional social work was introduced by the French Red Cross in 1947 when it established the Caritas School of Social Work.[142] The Viet Nam Association of Social Work was later founded in the South and joined the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) in 1970.[143] At this time, social workers were primarily expatriates from Europe, North America or Australia or were Vietnamese funded through European and American organizations.[144]

In the 1980s, the Vietnamese Government introduced the *Doi Moi* (renew) policy, which aimed to modernize the country and create a market economy.[145] While this led to significant economic growth and social benefits and greatly reduced the poverty rate (from higher than 60 per cent of the population at the beginning of the 1980s to roughly 5 per cent in 2020[146]), it also contributed to a new array of social problems such as increased crime, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, substance abuse disorders and communicable diseases. It also increased the number of individuals in need of special protection (including children, older people and individuals with disabilities) and eroded family networks.[147]

In response to these new, complex issues, the Vietnamese Government attempted to improve the social service system and workforce. To recognize social work as a discipline at the university level, the Government established a social work training and qualification code in 2004 (*Decision 35/2004/QĐ-BGDĐT*)[148] and approved a core undergraduate social work curriculum, which included key requirements outlined by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and IFSW.[149] This began the process of professionalization[150] and led to a significant increase in the number of social work educational programs: from four in 2004 to 37 in 2021 (of which seven offer master's degrees and two offer doctorate programs).[151] In 2010, through the adoption of *Decision 32/2010/QĐ-TTg,* the Government created a *National Plan on Social Work Development* and launched a 10-year strategy to develop social work as a profession and create a system to deliver social work services across the country.[152]

[I] A Decree is a higher level of legislation than a circular but lower than other forms of legislation.

Timeline of key events in social service workforce strengthening in Viet Nam

- **1947** Professional social work introduced by the French Red Cross in the South
- **1954** Viet Nam divided into two countries
- **1970** Viet Nam Association of Social Work founded and joins the IFSW
- **1975** Socialist Republic of Viet Nam is declared
- **1986** Government introduces the Doi Moi (renew) policy
- **2004** *Decision 35/2004/QĐ-BGDĐT* approves social work education at the university and college level
- **2010** *Decision 32/2010/QĐ-TTg National Programme on Social Work Development* for the period of 2010–2020 is adopted. *Circular 34/2010/TT-BLDTBXH* on social work job codes creates a three-tier structure of principal social worker, social worker and assistant social worker
- **2011** *Decision 2514/QĐ-BYT* establishes social work in the health sector
- **2013** *Circular 07/2013/ TT-BLĐTBXH* establishes 'social work collaborators' at commune level; *Circular 09/2013/TTLT-BLĐTBXH-BNV* creates social work service centres at district level; Viet Nam Association of Vocational Training and Social Work established
- **2015** Circular 43/2015/TT-BYT approved by Ministry of Health to implement social work in hospitals
- **2018** *Circular 33/2018/TT-BGDĐT* approved by the Ministry of Education and Training to implement social work in schools
- **2020** *Ha Noi Declaration on Strengthening Social Work Towards Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN Community* issued
- **2021** *Decision 112/QD-TTg* creates *National Programme on Social Work Development* (2021–2030); *ASEAN Road Map for the Implementation of the Ha Noi Declaration on Strengthening Social Work* developed; *Decision 4669/QĐ-BGDĐT* initiates plan on development of social work in the education sector (2021-2025)
- **2022** *Decision 712/ QĐ-BYT* initiates plan on the development of social work in the health sector (2021-2030)

Composition of the social service workforce

The social service workforce in Viet Nam is quite broad, with several defined categories. These include professionals who have a qualified education in social work, para professionals who have attended some social work training, allied professionals who largely work in other fields but provide services to the same groups of individuals (such as health workers), and volunteers who support programs serving vulnerable groups. The workforce is largely governed by the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs; the Ministry of Health; and the Ministry of Education and Training, and is positioned at provincial, district and commune levels.[153] Mass organizations (such as the Women's Union and Youth Union), I/NGOs and faith-based organizations also play an important role in social service delivery.[154]

Progress and achievements in social service workforce strengthening: 2010 to present

The social service workforce in Viet Nam has developed quite rapidly. What Viet Nam accomplished in just a few decades, following the *Doi Moi* policy, took some Western countries a century.[155] The key achievements in strengthening the social service workforce in Viet Nam are described below and categorized according to the *Social Service Workforce Strengthening Framework*.[156]

Planning

The main legal framework governing the social service workforce in Viet Nam was set out in *Decision 32/2010/QĐ-TTg,* which was approved by the Prime Minister in 2010.[157] It set into motion the expansion and professionalization of the social services and laid the foundation for a strategic approach to planning the social service workforce.[158] The *Decision* launched a 10-year multi-pronged strategy to develop social work.[159] This strategy was adopted alongside a social security strategy to increase social assistance to citizens, especially the most vulnerable. These two strategies worked in parallel and were self-reinforcing: expanding social assistance contributed to an increase in *demand* for social service staff, and the strengthening and formalization of the social service workforce improved the *supply* of qualified staff, which was followed by recognition of the impact that social assistance and social services could have.

The decrees and circulars that followed *Decision 32* are the legal instruments that created the present-day social service workforce in Viet Nam.[160] *Circular 34* created job codes and a three-tier system for social work roles (including principal social workers, social workers and assistant social workers), which followed national professional education standards.[161] *Circular 26* further defined educational requirements and key job duties for each of these categories.[162]

Decision 32 also led to the development and adoption of circulars that outlined the development of social work in other sectors, namely the health and education sectors. In July 2011, *Decision 2514* was issued by the Minister of Health to develop social work in healthcare facilities and commence university training programs for hospital social work, and later, in 2015, *Circular 43* was approved to implement these activities.[163] Recently, the Ministry of Health promulgated *Circular 03*, which officially establishes social work staff positions in hospitals, provides guidance on the ratio of social workers per patient and enables further development of social work in the health system.[164] To date, it is estimated that 100 per cent of central-level hospitals and 96 per cent of provincial-level hospitals have a social worker.[165]

Circulars were also approved to create social service centres at the district level (*Circular 09* in 2013) and develop social work in schools (*Circular 22* in 2018). Recently, the Ministry of Education and Training promulgated *Circular 20* which stipulates that all schools (from primary to secondary education) will have, for the first time, a school counselor position.[166] The position is a full-time staff post in each school to provide psychosocial support for students. The school counselor will also be the focal point for social work services and child protection in schools.

Decision 32 and its 10-year strategy (2010-2020) was followed by the adoption of *Decision 112* by the Prime Minister in January 2021 to cover the period from 2021-2030.[167] It aims to further promote social work development in various sectors and levels, aligning with the country's socio-economic development in each stage. The program's objectives include enhancing society's awareness of social work, improving the quality of social work services in different fields and meeting the social work service needs of the people.

Alliance contribution to social service workforce strengthening in Southeast Asia: Development of the first regional framework for social service workforce strengthening

In 2019, the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance partnered with UNICEF to map the social service workforce across Southeast Asia. The mapping highlighted significant challenges—including very low ratios of social workers per population, only three countries in the region with a professionalized workforce and poor public perceptions of social workers. These challenges were preventing the workforce from being able to support and protect the most vulnerable and marginalized communities. In response, the Alliance and UNICEF worked with the Government of Viet Nam to host the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Social Work Consortium Regional Workshop, through which ASEAN member states developed a legal framework for social work development in the region. As the first-ever regional framework of its kind, the *Ha Noi Declaration for Strengthening Social Work Towards Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN Community* provides a high-level commitment to invest in and expand the social service workforce across Southeast Asia. Later, the Alliance worked with UNICEF and ASEAN to develop a roadmap for action, based on the declaration, and a set of regional guidance notes to help ASEAN member states implement the roadmap.

Developing

One of the key challenges originally noted by the Viet Nam team at the 2010 Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference was the limited technical capacity and lack of quality training for the social service workforce.[168] Efforts to develop the social service workforce since 2010 have focused on setting standards, expanding educational opportunities and improving curricula.

While social work education was formally approved in 2004, it was *Decision 32* in 2010 that set into motion greater alignment of education and training for the social service workforce in Viet Nam. The *Decision* led to the establishment of human resource job codes, a code of ethics and professional standards. The *Decision* also led to training requirements for the workforce.[169] Like many countries, Viet Nam had many individuals filling social work roles with little to no social work training. In 2005, it was estimated that less than a quarter of the 15,000 to 20,000 social service workers in the country were trained.[170] *Decision 32* set a goal of providing training to 60,000 individuals.[171]

There were also several efforts to expand educational opportunities, strengthen teaching methods and improve curricula. While the greatest increase in the number of academic institutions offering social work training and education institutions occurred between 2004 and 2009 (from four to 30), this growth has continued over the past decade (from 30 to 37).[172] To strengthen teaching methods, the USAID-funded Social Work Education Enhancement Project created a collaboration between Vietnamese universities; the Ministries of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs and Education and Training; and community stakeholders to develop a competency-based curriculum to ensure that social workers trained in Viet Nam had "multidimensional and…interrelated competencies" to deliver essential social work services.[173] Significant effort has also been put into moving beyond theory-based knowledge to practice-informed knowledge.[174] To this end, there have been ongoing efforts to increase collaborations to improve field placements to enable students to translate theory to practice.[175]

As the number of university programs has grown, there has been a focus on ensuring that curricula incorporate both indigenous knowledge as well as international best practices. When social work education was reintroduced in Viet Nam in the 1990s, most training programs were short-term, and the training content and delivery were largely done by international organizations.[176] Even in 2010, social work was still relatively new in its development. The theories, methods, curriculum and training materials were all based on social work from high-income countries where the profession has been well-established for many decades.[177] Several initiatives have aimed to address the reliance on foreign curricula. Universities such as the Open University of Ho Chi Minh City have been making progress in developing suitable course materials for the Vietnamese context.[178] This has included incorporating the Vietnamese values of family and community support into the models of practice. UNICEF, for example, created a model for a community-based child protection system that is deeply rooted in community networks and social capital.[179]

Supporting

Efforts to support the social service workforce since 2010 have focused on developing systems to improve the performance of the social service workforce. Through legislation, like the 2016 *Child Law,* which domesticated the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child,* and the 2017 *Decree 56,* which put forth case management guidance for vulnerable children, professional standards have been established to set criteria for quality social services.[180] In addition, the social work service centres and incorporation of social workers in hospitals and schools have created an expansive infrastructure to effectively deliver social services.

Supporting efforts have also focused on developing partnerships. Partnerships between universities and national NGOs in Viet Nam have helped create more social work positions for newly trained staff, and have expanded field education for students, which has provided tangible support in the form of paid employment, supervision and professional development. Partnerships with UN actors, specifically UNICEF and the United Nations Volunteer Programme, as well as partnerships with many INGOs, have played a crucial role in supporting many of the efforts described above and helping to make them a reality. One specific achievement was the reported increase in international and national partnerships that are built

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as more of an equal collaboration, with mutual respect from Vietnamese actors to external knowledge and skills and the respect of INGOs to Vietnamese culture and knowledge.[181]

The road ahead: Challenges and priorities for the next decade

While the legal framework for the development of professional social work has been established, it is widely agreed that the framework is still insufficient. The completion of the legal framework is being prioritized and would include the adoption of the *Decree on Social Work,* the current draft of which outlines guidelines and regulations for social work activities.[182] Other aspects that the legal framework needs to address is leveraging the contributions of NGOs, proposing and establishing a social assistance law to provide a legal basis for social aid, and developing plans to enhance the network of social support facilities.[183]

The *Decree,* if passed, would also be important in establishing a budget for the social service workforce. While there was an established budget for *Decision 32,* because the current legal framework largely sits at the circular level with appointed department ministers, there are no established funding sources for many of the circulars promulgated by the *Decision.*[184] The lack of financial resources impacts the reach of social services—Viet Nam has more than 700 districts, and there are no social workers at the district level.[185] As such, there are many individuals who qualify for additional protection or support who currently still lack access to social services.[186]

The number of formally trained social workers in Viet Nam is still quite limited. Most staff delivering social work services have little to no training in social work.[187] In 2015, it was estimated that 60,000 social services staff would need social work training and retraining at various vocational levels.[188] While para professionals typically receive adequate administrative supervision, there is no system to ensure they receive supervision on carrying out social service and social work aspects of their jobs.[189] However, it is likely that, for the foreseeable future, Viet Nam's social service system will continue to rely on para professionals and therefore, finding a sustainable and a systematized approach to supervise, build the capacity of and retain the para professional workforce is critical.

There are several constraints in the development of professional training and education in Viet Nam. One is that there are not enough qualified social workers to supervise students and trainees, which contributes to the practice of employing people in social service roles who have qualifications in unrelated fields.[190] Further, universities have a significant shortage of faculty members trained in social work and social work curriculum.[191] Additionally, ensuring that individuals who are formally trained in social work can find employment is also challenging. Despite *Decision 32's* promulgation to increase the number of social workers, there has been a nationwide resolution to decrease civil servant positions across all ministries, which has made adding new social work positions increasingly challenging, and many recent graduates report they cannot find positions.[192] Finally, there is a need to develop professional competency standards for the social service workforce in different settings and systematized competency-based in-service training programmes for managers and frontline workers who have different training backgrounds but are working in social service delivery.

Despite these challenges, social service workforce strengthening efforts continue to be led with a clear vision and supported by strong collaboration. UNICEF and other actors have been advocating for the development of a law on social work to establish the role, function and mandate of the social service workforce. Currently, there is collaboration from the Government with the expectation that the proposed *Decree on Social Work* will be adopted. While a decree is not the highest form of legislation in Viet Nam, this would still be a significant step forward.[193]

Regional collaboration remains strong, with Viet Nam playing an active part in it. Viet Nam hosted the 37th Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) summit which led to the 2020 *Ha Noi Declaration on Strengthening Social Work towards Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN Community.* The declaration, and accompanying Road Map, capture the spirit that Vietnamese leaders and international partners are working toward: "to promote social work and strengthen its catalytic role in realizing a people-centred, people-oriented, and inclusive ASEAN Community, that enhances the capacities of the poor, vulnerable groups, achieves inclusion and enhances equitable access of those groups".[194]

4

The Evolution of Strengthening the Social Service Workforce: GLOBAL TRENDS

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Moving from social service workforce strengthening efforts at a national level, this section distils global trends in workforce strengthening since 2010, when the Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference took place. These themes were identified through two focus group discussions with 16 social service strengthening experts who have worked in multiple country contexts for 10 years or more. The highlighted trends do not represent *all* strengthening efforts that have occurred globally since 2010. Instead, the achievements and challenges discussed are based on those highlighted by the focus group discussants. The discussant's perspectives served as the foundation for key trends, which were then triangulated and supplemented with reference material identified through the literature review.[J] The 2010 Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference is solely used as a key date from which to examine social service workforce strengthening efforts. The efforts examined are not intended to be seen as having resulted either directly or indirectly from the conference unless noted.

Progress and achievements

When reflecting on the state of the social service workforce in 2010 and comparing it to 2023, the extent to which it has evolved in most countries over this time is significant, though still with a wide variation in trends and achievements among countries. The most notable successes are expanded upon below.

[J] If focus group discussants mentioned something that could not be validated, it was either not included or it was noted that it was shared by a key informant.

Acknowledgement of the need for and diversity of the workforce

While the concept of the social service workforce was not new when the Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference took place in 2010, this event is widely recognized as a significant milestone in launching a global movement that has led to increased acknowledgement of the role of the workforce in developing and delivering effective social service systems. Since the 2010 conference, governments and other stakeholders have also begun to recognize that the workforce encompasses not only professional social workers but para professionals, trained community volunteers and other specialists as well.

Many global-, regional- and country-level initiatives contributed to this growing recognition. For example, the Alliance's working group on para professionals in the social service workforce helped define the functions and activities of these workers and put forth a competency framework to inform their training and supervision.[195] The Isibindi project in South Africa, through 40 pieces of research, helped to demonstrate the impact of, and distinct roles within, the community-based workforce.[196] Uganda's work to develop, formalize and evaluate its para social work program helped build recognition of and support for the array of roles that para social workers play in social protection, especially in rural and underserved communities.[197]

Legislation to formalize and mandate the workforce

Since 2010, there has been an increase in countries adopting legal frameworks, regulations and mandates for the social service workforce. As of 2022, 65 countries had normative frameworks in place that defined social service workforce roles, functions and procedures.[198] The scope of national legislation varies, with some countries recognizing auxiliary roles within the workforce and others focusing solely on social workers. South Africa, for example, has a legal framework for social workers and a separate framework for community-based child and youth care workers. In Indonesia, on the other hand, the 2019 *Social Worker Law* only regulates professional social workers, but it also includes a mechanism for how allied workers can become certified as social workers if they meet certain requirements and professional standards.[199]

These legislative frameworks and mandates have played a critical role in workforce strengthening efforts. For example, when surveyed, members of the social service workforce in Azerbaijan viewed the adoption of the country's 2011 *Social Services Law* to be "a great step toward the institutionalization of social work in the country".[200] In Guyana, a recently drafted *Social Work Licensing Bill* is intended to lay the groundwork for multiple reforms, including the formal recognition of allied professionals and specialized social workers, and the development of accountability mechanisms.[201]

Development of national strategies and increased budgets

There has been an increase in countries establishing national strategies to strengthen the social service workforce and putting forth plans and budgets to support them. In Bolivia, planning tools were created for municipal associations to strengthen their planning and budgeting to improve child service delivery.[202] In Mexico, UNICEF conducted a training with advisors of elected officials who oversee the annual federal budget, to analyze social protection spending and make recommendations.[203] In the Solomon Islands, the Social Welfare Department completed a costing analysis in 2018 which tripled the department's budget and allowed them to increase the number of social welfare officers across all nine provinces.[204]

In Albania, several national strategies and plans have been adopted that have contributed to social service workforce strengthening, including the *National Social Protection Strategy* (2015-2020) and *National Agenda for Children's Rights* (2017-2020). These strategies work to advance the implementation of social protection mechanisms and child protection, impacting service delivery requirements and thus the qualifications of the workforce who delivers those services.[205] In Cambodia, a national strategic plan for training the social service workforce was adopted that employed an expansive definition of the social service

workforce, established standards for each of them, and outlined a plan for how the workforce would be trained in those standards.[206] In both Bhutan and the Maldives, national plans have been adopted that have created roadmaps for implementing legislation as well as outlined budget projections.[207]

Efforts to improve technical capacity

There has been an increase in countries establishing competency frameworks and standards for the social service workforce, which in turn, has helped professionalize the field. The USAID-funded Social Work Education Enhancement Project in Viet Nam created a program to train university faculty in competency-based education in social work.[208] In Bulgaria, competency-based models have been integrated into university social work curricula.[209] In Indonesia, a new social worker law mandated the development of a standardized competency test that social work universities must administer to graduates.[210] In 2020, IASSW and ISFW released updated global standards on social work education and training, which have helped education providers around the world to increase consistency in social work bachelor's and master's programs.[211] While many of these competency frameworks have focused on social workers specifically, some have a broader reach. For example, in Thailand, the Association of Social Workers developed a code of ethics and practice standards, now used not only by professional social workers but across the social service workforce.[212]

There is also a wider range of training modules available, including online learning opportunities, to help the workforce develop and strengthen its core competencies. Training opportunities have expanded in focus, reach and delivery. In Cambodia, a strategic plan for strengthening the social service workforce was developed, which resulted in the development of basic standards, 80 training modules and a four-level 'train the trainer' program.[213] In Fiji, an institutional and human resource capacity-building package was developed by UNICEF, which included training modules, materials, guidelines, forms and monitoring tools for social workers and social service supervisors.[214] In Bolivia, UNICEF worked to increase

capacity building for government-employed social service workers across all municipalities by developing a virtual campus with online training and courses.[215]

There have also been increases in the availability of training, frameworks and manuals for para professionals. In Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe there has been an increase in educational paths, focused on core competency development, for both social workers and para professionals.[216] In both Serbia and Bulgaria, there are more than 100 non-degree social service training courses and programs working to expand educational opportunities for social service staff.[217]

Development of curriculum and practice models based on indigenous knowledges and values

Since 2010, there has been an increased understanding of the imperative for the social service workforce to develop in ways that reflect, promote and build on the local context.[218] There is improved recognition of the need to 'decolonize' social work and replace Western bias in curriculum and practice models with indigenous knowledges and practices.[219] The IFSW and IASSW's 2014 updated definition of social work exemplified this growing awareness by including the importance of practice-based learning and establishing that indigenous knowledge is one of the underpinning theories of social work.[220] In 2020, when IFSW launched their second 10-year *Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development,* the traditional African value and principle of *Ubuntu* was emphasized as their first area of focus.[221]

While the implementation of decolonization and indigenization in practice is still limited, there has been an exponential increase in academic literature on the subject, and concerted efforts within organizations to address their complicity in exporting European- and American-centred approaches.[222] There is also a growing number of programmes and practice models developed from indigenous models. For example, Rwanda has developed a community- and family-based model of care and protection as part of its care reform process. Under this program, every village should have two community volunteers, one male and one female, known as "friends of the family" or *Inshuti z'Umuryango'* (IZU).[223] Currently, there are over 30,000 *Izu,* who are the first line of response in the protection of children. They are supported by professional social workers and psychologists at district level and receive ongoing training.[224] Another example comes from Central and South America, where a framework has been developed to help social workers integrate the diverse indigenous knowledges in the region into practice—it outlines how social workers should reflect on their own identity and values, work in a participatory way with communities, and advocate for social change and policies.[225]

Increase in professional associations

To support the social service workforce, the number of professional associations has increased. In Africa specifically, following the 2010 Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening conference, many countries started forming national professional associations as they came to realize their critical role in supporting the workforce.[226] Ethiopia, Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe have all launched or relaunched professional associations since 2010.[227] In addition to the supportive role they play, these professional associations have also been critical in facilitating planning, with most participating in different mapping activities to understand the human resource needs of the workforce.[228] While in most cases the associations have been for social workers specifically, there have been increases in the development of associations for other roles within the social service workforce. In Zambia, for example, work has been done to create community-level associations that are coordinated with a larger professional body.[229] In the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia, professional social work associations have played a positive role in each country's strengthening efforts, leading to a greater establishment of standards, ethical codes and accountability.[230]

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Greater collaboration, coordination and partnerships

Since 2010, partnerships have increased between social services and other sectors, with much higher recognition of the social service workforce in the health, justice and education sectors.[231] Partnerships have also increased transnationally with greater coordination and collaboration. As highlighted by a focus group discussant, prior to 2010, many countries were not aware of the strengthening efforts happening even in neighbouring countries and it has been cross-border networks, such as the Alliance, that helped share best practices and encourage collaboration within and across regions.

More multilaterals have also come on board to strengthen the social service workforce. While UNICEF has played a significant leadership role,[232] there have been more recent contributions from the World Bank, recognizing that the "lack of a well-staffed and well-paid public workforce not only impacts the quality of social service provision but weakens institutional protections."[233] Bilateral organizations and funders have also come on board to support the social service workforce including USAID[234] and the United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.[235] One example of a successful multilateral partnership comes from the partnership between UNICEF, in collaboration with Child Frontiers, and the Government of Timor-Leste over an 8-year period.[236] The long term engagement, focused on the development of a nascent child protection system, allowed for a partnership that centred on the identified priorities of the main national actors and enabled the processes to be built by them. The success of this was evident during COVID when travel restrictions limited international travel, but work in Timor-Leste continued to move forward in adapting and implementing approaches to strengthen the social service workforce in response to the new challenges.

The role of the Alliance in strengthening the social service workforce

The Global Social Service Workforce Alliance has played an important role in social service workforce strengthening since it was founded in 2013, drawing on ideas first seeded at the Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference in 2010. Across the interviews and focus group discussions that were held to inform this report, the Alliance was repeatedly identified as being a critical thought leader, advocate and convener. The Alliance's ability to translate knowledge into effective tools and models for best practice; convene a diverse, representative network of stakeholders; and provide insightful support was seen as essential for strengthening the social service workforce, particularly in low- to middle-income countries. The following are a few examples of how the Alliance has contributed to social service workforce strengthening since its development in 2013.

Increasing the availability of much-needed guidance and tools

The Alliance's widely recognized resources have provided workforce strengthening actors, at the global, regional, national and local levels, the essential tools to better plan, develop and support the social service workforce. Of the 27 resources developed by the Alliance, the technical tools identified by discussants and key informants as most useful, and most cited in identified literature, have been the *Social Service Workforce Strengthening Framework,* the *Social Service Workforce Mapping Toolkit,*[237] the *Proposed Guidance on Developing Minimum Social Service Workforce Ratios,*[238] the *Proposed Guidance for Costing the Social Service Workforce,* [239] the *Global Advocacy Toolkit for the Social Service Workforce* and the *Guidelines on Strengthening the Social Service Workforce for Child Protection.*[240]

The *Mapping Toolkit* was seen as particularly beneficial as it has helped to guide countries through the process of mapping their workforce so that they can make data-informed decisions on how to improve the workforce. For example, one discussant highlighted how the process of professionalizing the social service workforce in Armenia started in collaboration with UNICEF, USAID, and was greatly helped by being able to draw upon the Alliance's mapping resources. Several discussants and key informants noted that the *Proposed Guidance on Developing Minimum Social Service Workforce Ratios and the Proposed Guidance for Costing the Social Service Workforce,* even though only recently produced in 2022, have already proven to be critical in helping countries estimate the minimum number of workers needed for a specific context and determine the costs necessary to achieve that ratio.

Another example of a beneficial resource is the 2019 *Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Service Workforce for Child Protection.* Developed by the Alliance and UNICEF, these guidelines have provided a much-needed framework to accelerate programming on social service workforce strengthening at a national and regional level. Incorporating the core elements of the *Social Service Workforce Strengthening Framework*—planning, developing and supporting—the *Guidelines* provide evidence-based strategies and interventions to strengthen the social service workforce in the short, medium and long term. The *Guidelines,* and an accompanying *Results Matrix,* also provide strategies to improve country-, regional- and global- level monitoring of progress on social service workforce strengthening and its impact on child protection services. The indicators in the results matrix are now used annually by UNICEF to measure how countries are progressing in strengthening efforts and to identify global trends.[241]

The Alliance has also greatly increased the availability of technical guidance and tools produced by other organizations. The Alliance houses a vast database with over 1,350 resources related to workforce strengthening at a global level as well as within 148 different countries. This also showcases the overall increase in the availability of resources on social service workforce strengthening from a decade ago

Convening diverse stakeholders

The Alliance's ability to bring a diverse, representative group of stakeholders together has been instrumental in generating knowledge and building the evidence base for social service workforce strengthening. In 2010, at the Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference, many participants noted that they did now know how other countries were working to address challenges related to strengthening the workforce and, thus, were not learning from one another. In fact, this challenge was a major driving factor in the development of the Alliance. Over its 10-year history, the Alliance has grown and diversified its membership to facilitate collaboration and knowledge exchange among a diverse group of stakeholders engaged in workforce strengthening. At present, they have over 3,500 members from across 150 countries who are affiliated with government organizations, civil society organizations, academic institutions, donor groups, and professional associations. Their members also come from a variety of sectors, including health, education and justice, and from both humanitarian and development contexts, allowing for even more diversity in collaboration.

This inter-sectoral conversation has been increasingly evident in the participation of webinars and annual symposia hosted by the Alliance. Their annual symposium sees an average of 355 attendees from 28 countries and their webinars average 158 attendees from 40 countries.

Key informants and focus group participants for this report also noted the success of the Alliance in harnessing input from members and other stakeholders in the development of new tools or guidance through their member surveys and their thematic interest groups. The Alliance has hosted a total of seven interest groups focused on topics such as supervision, advocacy and case management. The participants in these discussions consistently reflect the broad diversity not only of the social service workforce itself but of the allied sectors and professionals with whom exchange and coordination are critical.

Building capacity to strengthen the workforce at a national level

The Alliance has also worked extensively with country-level stakeholders to develop plans and initiatives to strengthen their social service workforce at a national level. To date, the Alliance has worked with approximately 40 national governments to analyze their workforce systems and design and implement workforce strengthening strategies. This includes working with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to develop the first-ever regional framework to expand and strengthen the social service workforce across Southeast Asia after their mapping highlighted significant challenges—including very low ratios of social workers per population, only three countries in the region with a professionalized workforce, and poor public perceptions of social workers. The framework called on ASEAN member States to expand and invest in the workforce; develop costed national plans of action; professionalize social work; strengthen education, regulation and supervision; and promote positive perceptions of social workers. Since the development of the framework, the Alliance has helped four countries in the region develop national plans to strengthen the workforce.

Key informants and focus group participants for this report also noted the success of the Alliance's Ambassador Program. From 2016 to 2020, the Alliance facilitated two cohorts of ambassadors to develop social service workforce strengthening leaders and drive policy change at national and regional levels. During their tenure, 18 ambassadors worked to draft legislation to support professionalization of para workers, contributed to the formation of a national association of social workers, drafted a bill on regulating and licensing social work as a profession, increased budget allocations for the workforce from the government and more.

Advocating for the workforce

The Alliance is the only organization that works to strengthen the social service workforce and elevate understanding of, and garner support for, the workforce. They are also the only organization that focuses on advocating for the broader social service workforce, including para professionals and community volunteers. The Alliance's advocacy initiatives, such as their *Global Advocacy Toolkit,* their *Call to Action for Strengthening the Social Service Workforce to Better Protect Children and Achieve the SDGs,* signed by 35 organizations, and their hosting of Social Service Workforce Week, have all helped streamline social service workforce strengthening into the core work strategies of national governments and key international agencies and have also resulted in growing recognition of the role of the workforce in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

While there may be a long way to go to convince national-level actors not only to recognize the importance of the workforce but also to build it into plans and budgets to ensure it has sufficient resources in the long term, the Alliance has already made important strides in moving this agenda forward.

Timeline of key Alliance events and initiatives

November 2010 The Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference is held. The idea of the Alliance is proposed.

November 2010 *Social Service Workforce Strengthening Framework* is developed.

July 2011 Webinar series is launched to share promising practice examples of workforce strengthening across countries.

July 2011 A Steering Committee is formed and by-laws are created as a first step to forming the Alliance.

April 2012 A full-time director for the Alliance is hired (Amy Bess) and the membership and governance structures are determined. Subsequent Directors have included Betsy Sherwood (2018-2019) and, current Director, Hugh Salmon (2020-present).

June 2013 The Alliance is officially launched, thanks to funding from PEPFAR, and open for members to join. By the end of 2013, 266 members across 46 countries have joined.

April 2014 The Alliance hosts its first Social Service Workforce Week to bring attention to the importance of a strong social service workforce. The weeklong celebration has since been held annually.

August 2014 The Alliance publishes its first technical resource—a brief on the composition of the Social Service Workforce in HIV/AIDS-Affected Contexts. The Alliance has since published 27 additional resources to aid efforts to better plan, develop and support the workforce.

April 2014 The Alliance hosts its first symposium to provide a forum to discuss social service workforce strengthening efforts across the globe. Subsequent symposia have been held every year since, with the exception of 2020.

June 2015 The Alliance produces its first *State of the Social Service Workforce Report,* to shed light on key social service workforce data and trends. Subsequent reports have since been produced each year, with the exception of 2019, and have analyzed social service workforce-related trends and lessons learned in over 70 countries.

2015 The Alliance convenes its first interest group, which is focused on Para Professionals. A total of seven thematic interest groups have since been convened to harness input from members and other stakeholders in the development of new tools or guidance.

September 2016 The Alliance launches its Ambassador Program to develop social service workforce strengthening leaders and drive policy change at national and regional levels.

Continued on next page

Timeline of key Alliance events and initiatives *(continued)*

May 2017 — Alliance develops a *Global Advocacy Toolkit* to help those advocating for social service workforce strengthening efforts at the national and regional levels.

July 2018 — 35 organizations join the Alliance in issuing a *'Call to Action for Strengthening the Social Service Workforce to Better Protect Children and Achieve the SDGs'*.

2019 — The Alliance develops *Social Service Workforce Mapping Toolkit* and conducts workforce mapping assessments across 3 regions and 32 countries.

2019 — The Alliance and UNICEF develop first global *Guidelines on Strengthening the Social Service Workforce for Child Protection*.

2020 — The Alliance and UNICEF work with ASEAN to develop the *Ha Noi Declaration for Strengthening Social Work.*

April 2020 — The Alliance rapidly develops guidance on *Supporting the Social Service Workforce During the COVID-19 Pandemic.*

2021 — The Alliance starts work, with UNICEF, on the first mapping of the justice for children workforce in the South Asia region.

2022 — The Alliance supports efforts to strengthen the integration of social services across sectors and contexts through the development of guidance on the effective deployment of the social service workforce in health facilities, in schools, and within humanitarian contexts.

October 2022 — The Alliance works with UNICEF to develop the first-ever guidance on developing minimum social service workforce ratios and costing the workforce.

2023 — The Alliance continues to drive efforts to strengthen the workforce, including through new initiatives such as regional interest groups involved in making the investment case for the social service workforce and parallel projects to document and improve the role of the social service workforce in care reform.

Continued and emerging challenges

> **We've come so far but we're starting so far behind.**
>
> ***— Philip Goldman***

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While the achievements of strengthening the social service workforce since 2010 are noteworthy, many challenges remain.

Social service workforce remains misunderstood and undervalued

While the increase in normative frameworks, legislation and standards have significantly helped to define, formalize and elevate the status of the broad range of actors included in the social service workforce, the role of the workforce remains misunderstood and undervalued. This is especially true of the broader public. For example, in Israel, a study found that the public largely had ambivalent and vague perceptions about its social service workers.[242] Another study in Azerbaijan found that while the public generally recognizes the importance of social workers, there are frequent misunderstandings as to what they actually do—it is commonly thought that social workers just distribute pensions and food.[243] In Turkey, the role of social workers is often considered to be philanthropic, not professional.[244] Surveyed social service workers in Greece, Spain and Portugal reported that their societies generally believed that they made an insignificant contribution to clients' lives.[245]

Misperceptions and confusion about what the social service workforce does and why it is important still exist to some extent within the sector itself. A study in Ukraine found that the core values of social work were misunderstood by the very officials responsible for overseeing it.[246] In Uganda, it was reported that senior figures in government believed that social work education was "useless and irrelevant."[247] A review of the social service workforce in East Asia and the Pacific found that progress on policy development and implementation was hindered due a "lack of understanding [about the value of social service workforce]…and unclear roles and responsibilities."[248]

Some of this confusion may result from the fact that the definition of the social service workforce is both broad and diffuse. The combination of unclear job descriptions and legal mandates, large variations in hiring and job classifications, and significant fluidity in day-to-day roles and responsibilities creates a workforce that is both diverse and hard to describe.[249] This fluidity leads to a negative cycle: the lack of understanding about various roles means that decision makers often do not understand which responsibilities belong to which role, causing workers to increasingly perform many different roles (possibly outside the scope of their expertise), weakening their effectiveness and their perceived value.[250] Many focus group discussants highlighted this trend where, for example, community health workers and social workers are viewed interchangeably, and thus, become responsible for things outside of their training.

Lack of funding prioritization

Despite progress in the development of national plans, normative frameworks and legislation to strengthen the workforce, national financial allocations to implement them have not been prioritized, which significantly undermines their potential impact.[251] For example, in Bhutan, child protection positions were mandated through legislation but the positions were not funded, and therefore, not filled.[252] One of the key challenges for social service workforce strengthening in Tunisia was found to be a lack of funding for hiring staff, securing adequate supplies and having facilities from where staff can work.[253] Similarly, in Morocco, stakeholders ranked limited resources and low salaries as the biggest challenges facing the workforce and that improving worker conditions and wages should be the top priority—a finding the Alliance has found is echoed in many other countries.[254] Poor pay is a widespread issue, even in upper-middle- and high-income countries.[255] In China, non-profit social service workers were found to have worse financial well-being than the average employee in China, with more than one-third having to borrow money to pay off debt and one-fourth experiencing financial hardship.[256] During COVID-19 there was an increased recognition of the role that the social service workforce plays, and thus, increased hopes that it would increase social service funding. However, thus far there have not been signs of greater financial investment.[257]

Working conditions remain difficult and supervision is limited

In addition to poor pay, social service workers typically work in unconducive conditions, often without the necessary tools and equipment.[258] Further, they often face high caseloads and increasing responsibilities. In Georgia, an increase in regulation intended to ensure better protection to at-risk populations caused the social workers' statutory responsibilities to grow exponentially, from child protection and family support to include everything from early marriage to homelessness to cybercrime.[259] As a result, the average caseload per social worker increased from 14 cases in 2009 to 66 cases in 2017.[260] For indigenous social service workers in Taiwan, a study found that in addition to high caseloads, they experienced role ambiguity, received little support and frequently worked during holidays or time off.[261] While there have been initiatives to improve supervision, there is still a lack of available supervision and a lack of agreed-upon standards about what effective supervision entails.[262] All of these elements combine to create high levels of worker stress and emotional exhaustion. There is evidence that burnout among social service workers is a global phenomenon and a systematic review of 19 studies found burnout to have significant negative impacts on workers' well-being.[263]

Lack of evidence on the efficacy and impact of the workforce

The lack of investment and lack of recognition of the social service workforce partially stems from an overarching lack of evidence that demonstrates the impact of the workforce. There is a lack of basic data that impedes even descriptive mapping and stocktaking of the state of the social service workforce.[264] There is a lack of research and evidence on the impact of interventions and a lack of research that deploys diverse and rigorous methodologies. Much of the research that does exist is based on surveying the experiences, perceptions and priorities of members of the social service workforce itself, not on identifying measurable outcomes that workforce strengthening efforts have had (e.g. a competency framework improving skills of social service workforce) or more importantly that they have subsequently had on society (e.g. the training from the competency framework increasing workforce skills which led to a reduction in violence in the community). There is an urgent need to define and demonstrate the unique value of the social service workforce. In a range of country contexts, there has been effective evidence generation on the long-term, positive impacts that early childhood education has had, which has subsequently led to effective advocacy efforts and increased investment.[265] Among the few examples of the use of evidence for the social service workforce, one that stands out is from Moldova where Changing the Way We Care and the Ministry of Social Protection, made an investment case for family-based alternative care services. The economic analysis identified a 17 per cent rate of return for investing in a minimum package of services, which included the cost of the social service workforce to deliver the package of services.[266] It is this kind of evidence that is needed on a much more significant scale.

Over-reliance on external funding

Much of the funding that currently exists for the workforce often comes from development partners, which raises a few challenges. First, there is concern over the lack of long-term sustainability of programming and services once a donor's funding cycle ends. Second, these partnerships can directly or indirectly undermine indigenization and localization. At worst, funding can come with "inherent attitudes of hegemony and paternalism on the side of Western… donor partners who might view their collaboration with…counterparts as one-way traffic."[267] In other circumstances, even when mutual partnerships and the local context are highly valued, the overreliance on foreign funding by many low- and middle-income countries creates a power imbalance and leads national partners to adopt the priorities of funders.[268] As most funding comes from North American and European countries and organizations, there is a danger that these funding patterns perpetuate professional imperialism.[269]

5

LOOKING AHEAD: Priorities to Strengthen the Social Service Workforce

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Building on the national- and global-level trends in social service workforce strengthening since the landmark Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference in 2010, it is notable how much progress has been made. Many of the action items put forth by countries participating in the Conference have been accomplished or have advanced significantly.[270] Even just five years after the conference, a qualitative study that reviewed progress in eight of the countries that participated in the conference, found that all eight countries had made significant progress in efforts to plan, develop and support the social service workforce.[271] In 2022, 152 countries—close to 80 per cent of all countries globally and a 7 per cent increase from the previous year—were working to strengthen their social service workforces.[272] While the challenges facing social services and the social service workforce are immense, actors should be encouraged, and plan future activities with confidence, knowing that tangible progress in this area can be made.

It is noteworthy when assessing the evolution of social service workforce strengthening since 2010 how pivotal the Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference is perceived. While it cannot be concluded that this conference, or the subsequent formation of the Alliance, were directly responsible for the full range of social service workforce strengthening and the achievements identified in this report, what is apparent was the widely held view that the conference and formation of the Alliance represented crucial turning points.

As the Alliance and its members, partners and supporters consider where to focus social service workforce strengthening efforts over the next decade, it is worth reflecting on how these strengthening efforts began and how they might be replicated. Many evidence-informed change management strategies were at play: the conference set a clear vision of what needed to happen, garnered commitment from stakeholders to achieve it, and put forth a road map of steps to achieve that vision.[273] To emulate those best practices, what follows outlines the key priorities that the next vision and roadmap must address.

Towards a new vision and road map: Five priorities for the future

1 Bring greater clarity to the composition of the social service workforce

While significant attention has gone into defining the social service workforce, and specifically anchoring the social service workforce in terms of its many different roles and professions, there is still a lack of conceptual clarity on what the overall term means, whom it includes and does not include, and how prominent a role professional social work should have. Further, despite framing the workforce as an inclusive system with multiple, complementary components, there is an implied and reinforced hierarchy in which professional social work is seen as having the most prominent role. Critical reflection is needed on the different roles within the social service workforce, the subsequent implication of a hierarchy of tasks, and the assumption that the lower tasks can be performed by staff with less training.[274] While social work is the longest-standing and most formalized role in the social service workforce, there is a need to balance this acknowledgment with greater clarity and recognition of *all* roles in the workforce.[275]

2 Showcase the value of the workforce

Building on a clearer definition of who the social service workforce is, work is needed to better capture and communicate the value that the workforce brings to society. Several references were made in key informant interviews, focus group discussions and the literature, to the idea that the social service workforce is less valued than other sectors, such as education and health. While there are always things to be learned from other fields, the social service workforce may never be valued in the same way as the education and health sectors because most individuals have benefited from education and health services but typically only vulnerable and marginalized populations have received services from a social service worker. Therefore, it is critical that the unique value of the social service workforce constantly be articulated and showcased. Some promising examples of how this has been done at a national level include the advocacy letter by the NASWU to the government making it clear how the social service workforce has improved people's lives and the individual meetings with district representatives conducted by the CNASR to promote the profession.

3 Build the investment case for increased budget allocations

To address persistent inadequacy of government funding and to prevent an over-reliance on external funding, there is an urgent need to convince government decision makers that more robust and sustained investment in social service workforce planning, development and support is needed, and that the social services the workforce provide should receive a larger share of the budget. This does not always require additional resource allocation overall, but rather a re-prioritization of budgets and resources. To make this case there must be clarity on how many social service workers are needed in what roles, and how much this will cost for them to deliver services effectively and sustainably. The Alliance's Proposed Guidance on Developing Ratios and Proposed Guidance for Costing the Social Service Workforce

can help countries estimate the minimum number of workers needed for a specific context and to determine the costs necessary to achieve that ratio.

4 Provide tangible support to the current workforce, while planning and developing for a future workforce

Overwhelmingly the achievements highlighted at national and international levels through key informants and focus group discussants, and then subsequent desk-based research, fell most prominently into the category of *planning* and *developing* the social service workforce. Such achievements focused on legislation being passed, mappings and assessments being conducted, national workforce frameworks being developed, and competency frameworks being implemented. Efforts to *support* the social service workforce were mentioned significantly less. Several challenges were highlighted that drew attention to the need for support—burnout, turnover, working conditions—yet, there were few tangible examples of how those were being addressed. This is noteworthy, because high vacancy and turnover rates of social service workers was used as an impetus for the 2010 Social Welfare Workforce Strengthening Conference.[276] Planning is a foundational activity, and because the Alliance and other partners have deliberately taken a systemic approach in strengthening efforts, it is not surprising that there would be the most achievements in this area. However, as system components and normative frameworks are increasingly put into place by governments, future attention should be placed on bolstering initiatives to support the social service workforce in the implementation of these laws and frameworks. Efforts to plan for and develop a stronger workforce in the future, ultimately will not succeed if those in the current workforce is not supported.

5 Develop a plan to promote and prioritize indigenous knowledges

There has been a significant increase in the literature on professional imperialism and the imperative of decolonization and indigenization. However, the imperativeness with which it is mentioned in the literature,[277] and the general broad acceptance of its importance, do not appear to have been equally matched in its prevalence in the key informant interviews and focus group discussions conducted for this report. It has been argued that indigenization has failed because international frameworks have proved "impervious to cultural transformation and continue to dominate across diverse cultural contexts."[278] In key informant interviews and focus group discussions with national and global experts in social service workforce strengthening, indigenization was rarely mentioned if at all. For indigenization to move from a stated value to a practice, all social service workforce leaders need to prioritize and develop a plan to promote it. A very tangible and immediate area of focus, while by no means sufficient, would be to increase investment in developing scholarship and curriculum development from non-Western countries, in order to elevate different knowledge. Another area of focus would be on interrogating the priority to promote both indigenous knowledge *and* international best practice standards, as an effort to balance both entails a risk that Euro-American orientations will remain dominant.[279] As the Brazilian social worker Erick da Luz Scherf reiterates, "It is not about abandoning social work values and methodologies but recognizing that Indigenous understandings are of equal importance".[280]

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ANNEX

Annex 1: Evaluation questions and criteria

Report Focus	#	Summary of Questions	Evaluation Criteria
1. Who is the social service workforce? How has it changed?			
Evolution	1.1.	How do you define the social service workforce? Does that differ from how others define it?	**Relevance Sustainability**
	1.2.	What are the current key characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses of the SSW? How have the characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses of the SSW changed over the past 10 years?	
	1.3.	What are the key challenges that the SSW currently faces? How is the SSW prepared for /responding to these challenges? What challenges has the SSW faced over the past 10 years and how have they responded? How has government, I/NGOs responded?	
2. What initiatives have been implemented in strengthening the social service workforce?[1]			
Strengthening Initiatives	2.1.	What type of initiative was it? Planning? Developing? Supporting?	**Effectiveness Impact**
	2.2.	What was the impact of the initiative?	
	2.3.	What contributed to its success? Failure?	
3. How has the Alliance contributed to strengthening the SSW?			
Alliance Role	3.1.	What role has the Alliance had in strengthening the SSW?	**Impact Sustainability**
	3.2.	How do people see and interpret the role that the Alliance has had?	
	3.3.	How could the Alliance best contribute in the future? On what does it need to focus?	

Annex 2: Analysis matrix

Category of Initiative	Specific Activity
Planning	Adopt a strategic approach to planning the social service workforce
	Collect and share HR data and promote data-driven decision-making, specifically on how ratios are developed and funded
	Improve recruitment, hiring, and deployment practices and systems that take into account urban, peri-urban, and rural areas and decentralization plans
	Build alliances to strengthen leadership and advocacy among stakeholders
Developing	Align education and training for the social service workforce with effective workforce planning efforts
	Ensure curricula incorporate both local/ indigenous knowledge as well as international best practices for improving the well-being of children and families Strengthen faculty and teaching methods
	Provide broad range of professional development opportunities for workers
Supporting	Develop or strengthen systems to improve and sustain social service workforce performance, including efforts to improve supervision[1]
	Develop tools, resources, and initiatives to improve job satisfaction and retention
	Support professional associations in their efforts to enhance the professional growth and development of the social service workforce

Annex 3: Analysis framework

Objective	Data Source	Description	Analysis
Develop 3 case studies that • describe the state and evolution of the SSW in that country context • Identify specific country or local-level initiatives • Identify Alliance's impact at country- or local-level	KIIs	9 KIIs from 3 different countries who meet the established criteria	For each of the 3 respondents in a country, notes will be synthesized and analyzed along each evaluation criteria/question
	Academic and grey literature	Review of academic and grey literature	Identified to provide contextual details about the country context and triangulate information shared in the KIIs
Identify trends, key successes, gaps, and areas for future focus at a macro level/across multiple country contexts	FGD	1 FGD comprised of 3-5 subject matter and policy experts who have worked in multiple country contexts and in the field for 10+ years	Synthesized and analyzed for key themes and answers to evaluation questions/criteria
	KIIs	9 KIIs from 3 different countries who meet the criteria outlined below	Synthesized and analyzed to triangulate macro themes identified by the FGD
	Academic and grey literature	Review of academic and grey literature	Identified to provide context and further evidence to themes identified in FGD

Annex 4: Key informant interview and focus group discussion participants

Key Informant Interview Participants

Romania:

- **Diana Cristea,** *President,* Romanian College of Social Workers
- **Dr. Florin Lazar,** *Professor,* University of Bucharest, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work and Vice-president, National College of Social Workers from Romania
- **Dr. Nina Petre,** *Former Director of Operations,* World Vision and National Authority for Child Protection, Romania

Uganda:

- **Michael Byamukama,** *President,* National Association of Social Worker Uganda; *Country Director,* REPSSI
- **Irene Oluka,** *Child Protection Officer,* UNICEF Uganda
- **Dr. Janestic Twikirize,** *Associate Professor of Social Work,* Makerere University, Uganda

Viet Nam:

- **To Duc,** *Director General,* Department of Social Protection, Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs, Viet Nam
- **Le Hong Loan,** *Chief,* Child Protection Section, UNICEF Viet Nam
- **Dr. Lan Nguyễn Thị Thái,** *Lecturer of Social Work,* Faculty of Sociology, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University

Focus Group Discussion Participants

- **Dr. Mira Antonyan,** *Executive Director,* FAR Children's Center
- **Gretchen Bachman,** *Sr. Advisor Orphans and Vulnerable Children,* Office of the Global AIDS Coordinator and Global Health Diplomacy, United States Department of State
- **Angie Bamgbose,** *Senior Associate,* Child Frontiers
- **Beth Bradford,** *Senior Associate,* Maestral International
- **Jane Calder,** *Former Senior Child Protection Advisor,* Save the Children International
- **Dr. Rebecca Davis,** *Associate Professor for Professional Practice and Director of the Center for Global Social Work,* School of Social Work, Rutgers University
- **Philip Goldman,** *President,* Maestral International
- **Kendra Gregson,** *Regional Child Protection Advisor,* UNICEF
- **Gormley McCaffery, Dr. James McCaffery, PhD,** *Senior Advisor,* Training Resources Group, United States
- **Maury Mendenhall,** *Senior Technical Advisor,* Orphans and Vulnerable Children, USAID, Office of HIV/AIDS
- **Joachim Mumba,** *Global President,* International Association of Social Workers
- **Natia Partskhaladze,** *Founder and Board Member,* Georgian Association of Social Workers
- **Jini Roby,** *Professor Emeritus of Social Work, Independent Consultant,* J.L. Roby Consulting, LLC.
- **Barbara Shank,** *Dean and Professor Emerita,* University of St. Thomas
- **Zeni Thumbadoo,** *Deputy Director,* National Association of Child Care Workers, South Africa
- **John Williamson,** *Former Senior Technical Advisor,* Children in Adversity Team, USAID

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