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**Submission by the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance for the Committee on the Rights of the Child’s Day of General Discussion on Children’s Rights and Alternative Care**

**30th June 2021**

This submission outlines the global evidence, knowledge and guidance of the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, on the key role played by the social service workforce in the support, care and protection of children and families, and in reform of the alternative care system towards family- and community-based care.

**Defining the social service workforce**

The social service workforce includes a wide range of governmental and nongovernmental professionals, para professionals and community volunteers, working with individuals and families across the life cycle. They provide preventative, responsive and promotive services, informed by the humanities and social sciences, indigenous knowledge, discipline-specific and interdisciplinary knowledge and skills, and ethical principles.

Social service workers engage people, structures and organizations to facilitate access to needed services, alleviate poverty, challenge and reduce discrimination and social isolation, promote social justice and human rights, and prevent and respond to violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect and family separation.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The workforce includes front-line practitioners, researchers, managers and educators, with diverse titles and roles from social workers, case workers and case managers, to community workers, child and youth care workers, child protection and youth care workers. Also included are workers addressing gender-based violence, and providing support, care and protection for persons with disabilities or mental health needs, for children on the move, and for older people. The exact job titles and functions vary according to local laws, policies, culture, traditions and historical context.

**Strengthening the social service workforce to provide child rights-based care and protection**

A competent, well-supported, supervised social service workforce is well placed to uphold children’s rights to grow up in the care of their family and community, and, when necessary, to receive suitable family-based alternative care. Equipped with the right tools and resources, social service workers can prevent unnecessary separation of children from their families, enable those who have lost family care to return safely, and ensure that children who need it receive high quality alternative care, free from stigma and discrimination.

The Global Social Service Workforce Alliance has carried out a series of multi-country reviews to map the workforce or assess workforce support systems, across Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, and Eastern and Southern Africa.[[2]](#footnote-2) This submission is informed by the main findings and recommendations of these reviews.

**Prevention of family separation through support services and social protection**

The social service workforce can play a central role in preventing family separation by developing and providing appropriate and culturally relevant family support services. It is estimated that, globally, 80 per cent of children living in residential care institutions have at least one living parent.[[3]](#footnote-3) Many of these children would be able to grow up in their own family if their family could receive appropriate and effective support services. When care and support services are combined with social protection, in the form of universal or conditional cash transfers and other benefits, the impact on family strengthening, and prevention of harm and family breakdown can be even more profound and lasting.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Reforms in many countries to social welfare and child protection laws and policies over the last two decades have emphasized the key role of the social service workforce in providing community-based services, to prevent the need for institutional care of children, in particular through family strengthening.[[5]](#footnote-5) In a wide range of countries policies and programmes have now been developed to promote proactive family support interventions, through the deployment of the social service workforce at the community level, including a combination of professionals, para professionals and community volunteers.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In Tunisia, family strengthening and an effective family-based alternative care system is now a core priority of the social service workforce, as per national legislation and strategy.[[7]](#footnote-7) The mapping of the workforce by the Alliance found that 80% of the workforce in Tunisia carry out interventions to support vulnerable individual or families, and 96% regularly make referrals to state and civil society community-based services, with the goal of preventing family separation.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In Moldova, the National Strategy and Action Plan for the Reform of the Residential Childcare System 2007– 2012 played a key role in establishing a decentralized system of care and protection for children. For this purpose, a network of professional and para professional social workers was established, recruited from and serving every community, and trained and tasked with the outreach and direct work with children at risk of or experiencing abuse, neglect, or family separation and their families. They have also helped establish the connection to cash assistance and other social protection programs and interventions. This community workforce has played a key role in strengthening families, reducing rates of family separation, closing large-scale residential institutions and advancing care reform.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the social and economic pressures on families, and whether though unplanned separation or death of family members, has placed children at acute risk of loss of adequate family care, which could result in a rapid increase in admission to institutional care, as in previous large-scale crises.[[10]](#footnote-10) [[11]](#footnote-11) As in those crises, the social service workforce is playing a key role in strengthening family and community services to prevent wide scale family breakdown, and where temporary separation is unavoidable, to facilitate safe tracing and family reunification as soon as possible.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Support for family contact and reunification and child-family contact**

The support provided by the workforce for safe family reunification is as important as prevention of separation for upholding children’s rights to family-based care. This work can be especially challenging in countries where the process of admission of children into state care quickly leads to the legal termination of the child and family relationship, without exploring or supporting alternatives. It can also be challenging where children in poverty, with disabilities or from specific ethnic minorities or indigenous groups are discriminated against, with lower thresholds for admission to alternative care, and additional obstacles to family reunification.[[13]](#footnote-13) In Georgia, however, where almost all large scale institutions have now been closed, through sustained child care system reform through the combined efforts of both state and NGO social workers, a third of children in these institutions were enabled to return to their families. [[14]](#footnote-14)

An effective social service workforce is vital to ensure the successful completion of the overall process known as reintegration, which includes rebuilding relationships through contact, and helping families address the problems that initially led to separation.[[15]](#footnote-15) This was shown through later research in Georgia which found higher quality of life scores among reintegrated children who were consistently supported by a social worker during and after the process.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The importance of the assessment, planning and long-term case management that the social service workforce can provide in supporting reintegration has been highlighted by recent reports of the adverse consequences of unplanned return of children to families when institutions were rapidly closed in certain countries, early in the COVID-19 pandemic.[[17]](#footnote-17)

As important in successful reintegration as the role of case workers is the role of children’s caregivers, both residential care staff and foster carers. If they have a caring, trusted relationship with the child, they are well placed to help prepare and reassure them through the process, and to facilitate safe, positive and gradually increasing contact visits from and to family members, an important stepping stone to successful reintegration.[[18]](#footnote-18) [[19]](#footnote-19)

**The role of the workforce in providing and assuring high quality alternative care**

When alternative care is both necessary and suitable, as an interim or long-term arrangement, the social service workforce plays a wide range of key roles in ensuring that it is in the best interests of the child and of the highest possible quality. Their role includes gatekeeping assessment and decision making,[[20]](#footnote-20) visiting, supporting and monitoring the welfare of the child during placement, planning and reviewing placements, and ensuring positive transitions from short to long-term alternative care. They also can play a key role in preparation, continuous support and follow-up for young people in the vital but challenging transition from care to independence. The quality of these services relies on the workforce being suitably trained, supported, motivated and supervised to take a child-centred and rights-based approach.

**The role of the workforce in enabling child participation**

The social service workforce plays a key role in ensuring children’s views in alternative care assessment and decision making are heard at all stages, including in assessment and planning to inform key decisions on placements, followed by monitoring and review. For this the workforce requires not only a child-centred, rights-based approach, but training and supervision to develop skills in communication with children, and in ensuring their voices are heard and interests represented, regardless of age, disability, language, ethnicity or other aspect of their background.

**The role of the workforce in care system reform**

While policy makers and decision makers clearly play a key role in driving transformation of care services from institutional to family and community-based models, direct providers of care, both directors of institutions and caregivers, are also indispensable in achieving change. They can act as major obstacle to the phasing out of institutional care when they oppose it concerned in part about their loss of livelihood, but can also act as key players in the transition to new types of services when incentivised, motivated, re-trained and re-deployed to new roles in family and community-based services. Experience shows that, when informed and then involved in the process of change, residential care staff become less resistant, leading to positive outcomes for children.[[21]](#footnote-21) [[22]](#footnote-22)

**Effective strategies to strengthen the workforce and ensure that it is adequately skilled, supported and supervised to fulfil its critical role and responsibilities effectively, in line with human rights standards.**

The first step in strengthening the workforce is for governments and key national partners to agree a clear definition of the social service workforce in their context, that can then be used to collect data about its composition and capacity gaps. The Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Service Workforce for Child Protection set out a series of key actions, subsequent to developing a definition and collecting workforce data, under three main areas.[[23]](#footnote-23)

*Planning the workforce:*

* Development of evidence-based, contextualized national strategic plans on strengthening the social service workforce, integrated with plans for social protection, child protection and other relevant national strategic frameworks.
* Use of workforce data and definition to set the target of an optimal ratio of social service workers to unit of population, considering the national context and range of needs they need to address. Too low a ratio can lead to excessive caseloads and staff burnout, and it limits the scope of outreach and quality of engagement with the individuals, families and communities served.
* Development of specific laws and policies to increase the professionalisation of the workforce through outlining and defining functions, a competency framework, practice standards and common accountability frameworks.
* Policies on salary equity across regions of the country and urban/rural areas, aimed at increasing recruitment and retention of qualified professionals, and ensuring parity with other comparable professions.
* Establishing mechanisms, systems and structures for quality assurance, and standardized registration and licensing of members of the workforce.

*Developing the workforce*

* Development of appropriate education and training at all levels of the workforce, including professionals and para professionals, and establishing social work degree programme in academic institutions, with trained, experienced faculty.
* Aligning training and education of the social service workforce with national priorities related to child and social protection and other relevant fields, as well as international and regional standards.
* Partnerships between international institutions and service agencies, where local higher education capacity is lacking, to support the development of contextually and locally informed training and education programmes.
* Collaboration between education and training institutions and social services to create and support viable practice learning, which is supervise and assessed, and clear standards and parameters for effective practice learning placements.
* Setting up in-service and pre-service certified training under government endorsed, accredited programmes.
* Recognising and defining para professionals as a formal category of workers, who receive ongoing training and professional development opportunities.

*Supporting the workforce*

* Investments to ensure all members of the workforce receive consistent and regular high-quality supervision and support.[[24]](#footnote-24)
* Recognising and supporting professional associations to play a key national role in developing and promoting professional standards and a code of ethics, advancing practice-informed policies and promoting positive perceptions of the workforce.
* Developing appropriate mechanisms and opportunities for career advancement.
* Communication strategies to tackle negative public perceptions of social work and social service workers, to enhance recruitment and retention.

1. Adapted from the definition of the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance <https://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/sites/default/files/uploads/Definition-Social-Service-Workforce.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/alliance-resources> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Csáky, C., Keeping children out of harmful institutions: why we should be investing in family-based care, Save the Children, 2009, p 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Roelen et al. (2017). How to make ‘cash plus’ work: Linking cash transfers to services and sectors. https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/IDS%20WP%20Rev%20Jan%202018.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://bettercarenetwork.org/search?search_api_fulltext=country+care+profiles> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A para professional or para social worker, is typically trained and supervised to perform certain functions at community level, without needing a university degree or full professional qualification. They may be unpaid, but generally receive some form of salary or stipend. <https://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/resources/para-professionals-social-service-workforce-guiding-principles-functions-and-0> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. République Tunisienne (2016). Quelle Protection de l’Enfance dans dix ans? Document de Politique Publique Intégrée de Protection de l’Enfance [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. UNICEF, GSSWA and Maestral International (2019) Multi-Country Review of the State of the Social Service Workforce in the Middle East and North Africa Region. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Better Care Network and Global Social Service Workforce Alliance (2014). Working Paper on the Role of Social Service Workforce Development in Care Reform. Washington, DC: IntraHealth International. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Martin, F. (2013) Changing the Paradigm: Save the Children's Work to Strengthen the Child Protection System in Indonesia 2005 - 2012. Save the Children. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Brooks, A (2016) Care and Protection of Children in the West African Ebola Virus Disease Epidemic: Lessons learned for future public health emergencies. UNICEF [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Global Social Service Workforce Alliance. Annual State of the Social Service Workforce Report, 2020 (draft – publication expected August 2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Better Care Network: Romania (2017)and Bulgaria (2018) Country Care Reviews <https://bettercarenetwork.org/international-framework/country-care-reviews> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Greenberg, A.L., and Partskhaladze, N. (2014) How the Republic of Georgia Nearly Eliminated the Use of Institutional Care for Children. Infant Mental Health Journal, Vol. 35(3), 1–6 (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Family for Every Child (2016): Guidelines on Children’s Reintegration, developed by the inter-agency group on children’s reintegration. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Partskhaladze, N. (2020). Quality of Life as an Outcome Measure of the Child Care System Reform in Georgia. Doctoral Thesis. Tbilisi, Georgia [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <https://bettercarenetwork.org/library/particular-threats-to-childrens-care-and-protection/covid-19/alternative-care-and-covid-19/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-the-care-of-children-living-in-residential-institutions> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Save the Children (2014). Institutional Care – the last Resort. Policy Brief [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. UNICEF (2020). White Paper on the role of small-scale residential care for children in the transition from institutional- to community-based care and in the continuum of care in the Europe and Central Asia Region. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. BCN and UNICEF (2015). Making Decisions for the Better Care of Children: The role of gatekeeping in

    strengthening family-based care and reforming alternative care systems [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Tobis, D. (2000). Moving from Residential Institutions to Community-Based Social Services in Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Browne, K. and G. Mulheir (2007) De-institutionalising and Transforming Children’s Services: A guide to good practice, European Commission Daphne Programme. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. UNICEF and Global Social Service Workforce Alliance (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. GSSWA (20201) Guidance Manual on Strengthening Supervision for the Social Service Workforce <https://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/resources/guidance-manual-strengthening-supervision-social-service-workforce> [↑](#footnote-ref-24)