

# Call to Action: Strengthening the Social Service Workforce to Better Protect Children and Achieve the SDGs

We must work together to improve protection, health and well-being outcomes for children, youth, families and communities as outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals. These outcomes will only be achieved with a strong social service workforce backed by political, financial, technical and moral support. We, the undersigned, call on national and local governments, in coordination with national and global partners, to strengthen the social service workforce.

## Why is the Social Service Workforce Critical to Achieving the SDGs?

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outline strategies for countries to end poverty and improve the lives of children and families by addressing health, education, justice, migration and protection from violence. By committing to achieving the SDGs by 2030, UN member states affirm the fundamental rights of children to be protected from all forms of violence, abuse or exploitation. These goals cannot be achieved without a strong and locally-based social service workforce.

## Who is the Social Service Workforce?

The social service workforce is defined as paid and unpaid, governmental and nongovernmental professionals and para professionals who create protective environments for healthy development and well-being by: reducing discrimination; promoting social justice; ensuring protection from family separation, violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect; providing needed services; and caring for and supporting children, youth, families and communities. The social service workforce promotes the active participation of children and families in social services, advocates for their rights and well-being and empowers them to reach their full potential. Social service workers are often the first point of contact for children and families in crisis. They act as key facilitators and coordinators of support across different sectors, such as social services, health, education, social protection and justice. Working in government and through community-based structures, they are an important bridge between children, families, communities and service providers.

## Why Invest in the Social Service Workforce to Achieve the SDGs?

Child protection issues are costly to societies. Research has shown that abuse and maltreatment, for example, can lead to life-long physical and mental health problems and negatively impact boys' and girls' brain development and educational achievement. Studies in the US have explored the economic and societal impact of childhood violence and neglect with estimated costs ranging from \$80 billion to \$124 billion annually. A 2015 study in South Africa estimated costs of not responding to violence against children at 5% of its GDP and showed that preventing childhood exposure to violence contributes to the growth of the economy.

At the same time, social services remain severely under-resourced. Policy and decision-makers can demonstrate their commitment to ending violence against children by allocating budgets for the planning, development and support of the social service workforce. An investment in a strong social service workforce is a long-term investment in a resilient, peaceful and prosperous society.

## Recommended Action

Recognizing the importance of the social service workforce, we recommend the following key steps, building on efforts where they currently exist.

## Country Level Actions

We call on relevant state governments to initiate, lead and engage in dialogue with partners to:

- 1) Develop or enhance a ***national level, government-led workforce leadership group*** to coordinate all national efforts toward strengthening the social service workforce. The group should consist of high level representatives from some or all of the following: government, civil society groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), universities, training institutions and professional associations, religious entities, national donors, multilaterals and bilaterals, private sector and others involved in planning, budgeting, managing and supporting the country's social service workforce.

- 2) Assess the current status of workforce data and need for **workforce mapping**, to examine progress against workforce strengthening indicators including: availability of supportive legislation and policies; financial resources; information management systems; existing community-based structures; levels of education and training including field placements; existence and role of professional associations and regulatory bodies that establish licensing, competency standards and/or a professional code of ethics; number of professional and para professional workers at the national and subnational levels including their qualifications; workers' perceptions of work environment, supervision, job satisfaction, professional development, incentive systems and career paths. The workforce mapping should be led by the national level workforce leadership group.
- 3) Develop a **national workforce strengthening strategy** through the partnership mechanism described above and based on the national workforce mapping. The strategy should make choices about key workforce elements to strengthen in the near- and longer-term and should incorporate actions related to a diversified workforce of para professionals and professionals at community, district, regional and national levels. Including the views and experiences of children, youth and adults who have received services must be part of the development of such a strategy.
- 4) Obtain **funding and commitments** to implement the strategy and track progress.
- 5) Commit to the importance of **monitoring, evaluating and reporting** against agreed to indicators of social service workforce strengthening at the local, national and global levels to advance a shared social service workforce strengthening agenda.

## Global Level Actions

We recommend the following actions, as members and partners of the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance:

- 1) Contribute to knowledge exchange and building the evidence base
  - Participate in learning forums, exchange of information and knowledge sharing and document promising workforce strengthening approaches and strategies to achieve the SDGs related to child, youth, family and community well-being
  - Support research, raising awareness of existing evidence and building the evidence base through academic/practitioner alliances
- 2) Increase availability and access to funding
  - Work with donors to establish a pooled fund to support work at global and national levels to boost political will and mobilize resources for the workforce agenda
  - Expand private-public partnerships
- 3) Advocacy
  - Convene and support community actors, civil society and other non-state actors to intensify advocacy efforts to ensure that social service workforce strengthening is prioritized within the global agenda
  - Advocate for and support training institutions, regulatory bodies and professional associations to scale up transformative approaches to the production of skilled social service workers
  - Leverage regional and global platforms convened on related agendas to educate stakeholders on the importance of social service workforce strengthening to attainment of their goals

## The following organizations support this Call to Action:



This document is intended to serve as an advocacy document used to engage governments and other stakeholders in strengthening the social service workforce. For any questions about this document, please write to: contact@socialserviceworkforce.org.