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## Definition of the social service workforce

The social service workforce is an inclusive concept referring to a broad range of governmental and nongovernmental professionals and paraprofessionals 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 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, promote social justice and human rights, and prevent and respond to violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect and family separation.

*Given the diversities across contexts, this definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels.*

## Commentary

This commentary deals with who constitutes the social service workforce and their importance to human development and well-being, and it clarifies the following: the domain of social service workers; education and training; career pathing; the roles of social service workers; ethical requisites; legislation, statutory and non-statutory structures; and volunteers in the social service sector.

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 over time and make invaluable contributions to ensuring human well-being and development.

Whatever the title adopted in national or localized contexts, the social service workforce, inclusive of its broad spectrum, recognizes the indivisibility and interdependence of civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights. Social service workers often work with the most marginalized, excluded, and vulnerable groups of people. Greater care must be taken to ensure upholding and recognition of responsiveness to human dignity, and the protection and promotion of the fundamental rights of people.

One of the most pressing issues for peoples at large, and for national governments in particular, is to ensure that social service workers possess the requisite knowledge, skills, values and ethical commitments to work with people, whether at the level of individuals, families, groups and/or communities, and/or broader societal levels in ways that enhance development and well-being. To this end, national governments

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are urged to support legislation and establish systems and structures – where such do not exist or are weak - that will strengthen the social service workforce and ensure the highest standards of public accountability.

Governments across the world have made commitments to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which combined are intended to contribute to equitable, socially inclusive, integrated and environmentally sustainable economic growth, in the realization that human development, well-being and happiness are dependent on these.

Human development, happiness, life satisfaction, and freedom from suffering depend on: access to basic needs e.g. education, decent employment, food, shelter, security; building social trust and cohesive, non-violent societies; transparent and honest governments; empowerment of people at the personal and political levels, more especially at the intersection of these; non-discrimination in all forms; minimizing inequality; peaceful co-existence; high levels of civic participation; fostering global partnerships for sustainable development; and the promotion and protection of human rights. The social service workforce is central to the achievement of all of these.

## **Domains of social service workers**

Social service workers deal with some of the most urgent issues, including violence against children and youth in its various forms, domestic violence, poverty, unemployment, mental and physical health, sexual harassment and rape, crime, internal and external displacement of people, migration, addictions in their multiple forms, and discriminations based on intersecting social criteria such as age, gender, race, caste, language, religion, disability, sexuality, nationality and geographic location.

## **Education and Training**

The educational requisites of paraprofessionals and professionals in the social service sector vary across and, sometimes, within countries. Professional qualifications generally involve tertiary level education of between 3 to 4 years (with opportunities for further studies at Honors, Master and Doctoral levels). While the requisites for paraprofessionals are a great deal more varied, the promising practice is to have paraprofessional training regulated by law.

It is critical that national governments set standards for the education and training of the social service workforce that relate to theoretical and practical aspects of each of the professional and paraprofessional groupings, and is defined by nationally developed competency standards.

## **Career Pathing**

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The setting of nationally recognized educational standards at degree and non-degree levels must allow for horizontal and vertical articulation across qualifications and for the upward mobility of the social service workforce. Country specific occupational standards must be set to clarify different roles and their related competencies and educational levels to ensure a developed social service workforce. It is critical that national governments respond to the aspirations of the social service workforce in their pursuit of education, training and development.

### **Roles of social service workers**

In various fields of work, social service workers adopt numerous roles, including those of case managers, fund raisers, advocates, lobbyists, brokers, mediators, therapists, educators, facilitators, change agents, organizers, coordinators, researchers, and managers and directors of both small and large organizations.

Para professionals, who serve the needs of vulnerable individuals particularly where social welfare systems are underdeveloped or severely stretched, typically work in these roles next to or supporting the work of a professional in the same field.

### **Ethical requisites**

The ethical requisites of social service workers are broadly framed as: 1) recognition of the inherent dignity of humanity; 2) protection and promotion of human rights; 3) promoting social justice and equality, including challenging discrimination and institutional oppression, respect for diversity, promoting access to equitable resources, challenging unjust policies and practices, and building solidarity; 4) respecting people's right to self-determination; 5) promoting people's right to participation; 6) respecting confidentiality and privacy; 7) treating people as whole persons; 8) ethical use of technology and social media; and 9) upholding the standards of professional integrity, including supporting peace and non-violence and not abusing one's position of power. See <https://www.iassw-aiets.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Global-Social-Work-Statement-of-Ethical-Principles-IASSW-27-April-2018-1.pdf> for details of each of these principles, which are applicable to all categories of the social service workforce, and to allied professions such as law, medicine and nursing.

### **Legislation and statutory and non-statutory structures**

National legislation that sets requirements for registration and/or licensing of social service workers, educational standards and standards for practice, and the concomitant establishment of statutory bodies to ensure the enhancement, strengthening and regulation of the social service workforce, is imperative to safeguard the highest possible standards of public and professional accountability. Equally important are the establishment of voluntary professional associations that contribute to: the promotion of the ongoing development and strengthening of the social service workforce; legislative and policy development; the development of

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ethical codes of practice; and professional development that supports the enhancement of ethical practices.

### **Volunteers in the social service sector**

The enormous contributions of volunteers in the social service sector is acknowledged. Volunteers do not constitute a homogenous group; there is marked variability of educational attainment and skills levels and there are a multitude of motivations for volunteering. They may be professionals, paraprofessionals or non-professionals; and may or may not receive a stipend. It can be difficult to directly regulate the conduct of volunteers. It must remain the responsibility of organizations, and professionals and paraprofessionals who utilize the services of volunteers to ensure that volunteers have the requisite levels of competence and skills to engage in work in specific settings. Volunteers are required to abide by the core ethical principles that guide the social service sector, with the overarching value being doing no harm.

In situations where national governments rely on volunteers, in the absence of a developed social service workforce, it is suggested that a different title (e.g. community workers) be used to clearly distinguish their role in the system, as part of the social service workforce. It is the responsibility of the governments to assess these workers, provide appropriate education and training, supervision, opportunities for professional development, and appropriate incentives/compensation for their services.

### **Allied workers in the social service sector**

Allied workers are professionals and para professionals involved in sectors such as education, health or justice, who have critical roles related to care, support, prevention, empowerment, and the protection and promotion of the rights of people. They work closely alongside the social service workforce, but are aligned with other professional groups, such as doctors, nurses, lawyers, judges, teachers, and police.