

Strengthening the Social Service Workforce as Part of the Recovery Process to Support a Transformed Care and Protection System for Children in Ukraine

Background and overview

On 26 April 2023, the Better Care Network (BCN) and the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance (GSSWA) organized an event under the auspices of the Ukraine Children's Care Group¹ with child protection and care actors focused **on strengthening the social service workforce as part of the recovery process in Ukraine to support a transformed care and protection system for children**. The aim of the event was to bring actors together to better understand the impact of the conflict on the existing social service workforce, and to identify concrete recommendations for strengthening and reforming it as part of the recovery process to support a transformed care and protection system for children in Ukraine.

The event was focused on practitioners, technical advisors, and policymakers with the aim to hear from experts working in the care and protection of children in Ukraine to understand better what the priorities and challenges are in relation to strengthening the social service workforce.

Event sessions

The event included three core sessions:

- **Session 1:** The current situation of the social service workforce in Ukraine and the impact of the conflict on the workforce.
- **Session 2a:** The social service workforce development needs in the recovery process to support the redirection of services away from residential-based care to family-based care and child centered services.
- **Session 2b:** Exploring ways to integrate roles and approaches between the formal social work profession and the volunteer workforce.
- **Session 3:** What can be learnt about strengthening the social service workforce in post-conflict situations, in contexts that had previously heavily relied on residential care?

In each session, the gaps, needs, challenges, and recommended key actions were presented. Participants were encouraged during the event to make additional recommendations both verbally and on Jamboards that corresponded with each session. It is these recommendations provided by the presenters as well as the participants that form the basis of this report.

¹ Following the onset of armed conflict in Ukraine in February 2022 with the invasion by Russia and the significant care issues affecting children impacted by the conflict and displacement, the Transforming Children's Care (TCC) Global Collaborative supported by the Better Care Network established a temporary global inter-agency group focused on children's care in the context of the Ukraine crisis – the Ukraine Children's Care group. The group is convened by members of the Collaborative with the purpose of facilitating practical coordination and collaboration amongst development and humanitarian care actors supporting or operating in Ukraine and as part of the regional response in terms of guidance, tools and joint advocacy as needed.

Presenters, moderators, and participants

In total, 45 individuals participated. Participants represented Ukrainian national NGOs and civil society organizations, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and UN agencies, and donors. The event was moderated by representatives from BCN, GSSWA and Lumos. Presenters included Olya Moroz (Hope and Homes for Children, Head of Training Programmes, Session 1); Vasylyna Dybaylo (Director of Partnership for Every Child Ukraine, Session 2a); Olha Baidarova (International Leadership and Development Center, Research and Development Expert, Session 2b); and Sanela Bašić, (Faculty of Social Work, Sarajevo, Session 3). The event was interpreted in English and Ukrainian.

Session 1: The current situation of the social service workforce in Ukraine and the impact of the conflict on the workforce

In 2020, Ukraine started the reform of the system of social services. A new law was adopted, which introduced new social services and provided non-governmental organizations (NGOs) the opportunity to become actors in social services provision. It also presupposed the need for community services. However, there were several drawbacks, which included the addition of more than 25 regulatory acts to support the law, which led to too many changes happening very quickly and simultaneously. Further, more than 20 resolutions from the Cabinet of Ministers were made between 2021-2022. This made it challenging to process all the information and to implement it given the short duration. In addition, the law indicated that communities should offer a minimum of 18 basic social services on their territories and finance the services, which was a challenge for communities due to a lack of funding. While grants were available, they were dependent on meeting certain criteria, which could not be met by all communities. They were also mainly focused on support to children with disabilities. Ultimately, the lack of financing, and limited capacity of many communities to meet the criteria to obtain grants, stalled the implementation of the new law in many locations.

Another obstacle to the implementation of the law is related to the territorial and administrative reform. The law provides rural and urban communities with different powers. According to the Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine on the creation of foster families and family-type children's homes, only urban territorial communities and district administrations have the right to make decisions about the creation of these alternative care services and the placement of children in them. Rural territorial communities must contact the district administrations and ask them to establish a foster family or a family-type homes and to place the children in them. Rural territorial communities can only issue guardianship orders for children in need of care and protection. In other words, in relation to support for family-based care and small group homes, rural communities lack the mandate to establish these forms of alternative care, whereas urban communities can establish them and identify and support foster families. Further, the services that require the most resources, such as support to children with disabilities, are the least developed due to the lack of funding for supporting specialized services. Lastly,

higher educational institutions have not taken into account the changes that have taken place in the system of social services when training students, resulting in many students of social work require additional training following their studies.

Following the onset of the conflict, the implementation of the new law was paused. More recently, the provision of social services has become more humanitarian-focused, providing safety to children and families, and finding solutions to save lives. However, at the same time, the number of families requiring social services has increased. Many people have lost their employment or have been displaced from areas affected by the conflict to safer locations in Ukraine. These safer regions, however, were not prepared to meet the higher demand for social services. While many volunteers have supported efforts, local authorities in these regions lack the financial means to introduce new social worker positions as additional funding has not been provided by the government. To address the gap, international programmes have been introduced, but the project-based approach is limited in terms of timeframe and sustainability.

Key Recommendations

- Facilitate a quality assessment of social service needs at the community-level.
- Map and assess the current composition and capacity of the social service workforce, identifying key capacity gaps.
- Develop an action plan for strengthening the social service workforce.
- Increase funding at the community-level to fund positions for social workers and psychologists, particularly those specialized in working with vulnerable populations, including children at risk of losing family care.
- At a minimum, fund and implement the 18 basic services as described in the new law in each community.
- Increase services for children with disabilities and their families, and for young people and adults with disabilities (including supported accommodation and facilitation of transition to supported accommodation, early intervention services for children with disabilities, daycare, or a personal assistant for the child; social rehabilitation of persons with intellectual and mental disabilities; provision of respite care (in the form of regular short breaks)² for parents or persons, who replace them, who provide care for children with disabilities.
- Increase funding for social workers particularly in the territorial communities to allow for a greater number of social workers and increased salaries, to match recent increases in the cost of living, and to ensure social workers' salaries are comparable with other professionals in the health and education sectors.
- Review social work curriculum and update social work training programs in higher education institutions, in line with the new law, assessed social service needs and social service workforce strengthening action plan.
- Strengthen professional supervision, and provide coaching and mentoring support for social workers to prevent burnout.

² So that their parents or caregivers can have periodic opportunities for rest from their child care responsibilities, thus reducing the risk of family breakdown and placement of the child in residential care.

- Train the heads of government bodies at the local level on the implementation of social services.

Session 2a: The social service workforce development needs in the recovery process to support the redirection of services away from residential-based care to family-based care and child-centred services.

Partnership for Every Child Ukraine (P4EC) has analyzed data from 880 communities. Findings show that the minimum number of social workers per community is 1.7 social workers per community to a maximum of 18.3 per community (in more urban areas, such as Kyiv). The average number of community social workers is 2 to 3 per community, depending on the population.

The number of social workers per total general population differs from one oblast to another. For examples, in Chernihivska oblast there is one social worker for every 5,423 people (approximately 911 children); in Zaporizhska oblast, there is one social worker for 27,744 people (of which approximately 3,980 are children). The discrepancy between the number of available social workers per total population is huge and has become exacerbated as a result of the conflict because a greater number of children and families are in need of services. An example of the increased need is from one community in the Kharkivska oblast where the pre-conflict population was approximately 10,000. Due to the influx of approximately 15,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), the population increased significantly. There are 118 families with children that have been identified as being in difficult life circumstances, and a further 75 families with children identified as low income. However, there are only two community social workers available to support these families, and no psychologists.

Key Recommendations

To support the redirection of services away from residential-based care to family-based care and child-centred services:

- Increase the workforce in all parts of the social welfare system, including child protection services, social services, family-based alternative care and specialized social work.
- Restructure the child care system to ensure inter-agency cooperation and coordination (child protection, education, and health systems working together).
- Increase the salaries and number of community social workers to align with the level of need, in proportion to the size of the overall population, or the child population.
- Increase funding to enable the provision of universal social services, to help prevent or mitigate different forms of risk and adversity affecting children, families, and socially marginalised individuals and groups.
- Provide ongoing, regular training programmes and regular supportive professional supervision for social service workers.

- Increase the number of social workers and social assistants in each community that are specialized in family-based alternative care, and trained on the use of individual care plans for children placed in alternative care, including children with disabilities.
- Create opportunities for the professionalization of paraprofessionals (social service workers who play key roles but lack formal social work qualifications), as part of strengthening the overall capacity of the social work workforce, and to enable pathways for professional development and career progression for paraprofessionals.

Session 2b: Exploring ways to integrate roles and approaches between the formal social work profession and the volunteer / paraprofessional workforce.

Prior to the conflict and up until 2014, the volunteering opportunities were weak in Ukraine. However, by 2018, the number of volunteers had increased by approximately 53 percent. Volunteers mainly support people in need, children who have lost their parents, and people with disabilities. In 2011, a law was introduced to focus on volunteer activities, and later amendments were made, which led to the gradual professionalization of the volunteer sector. However, the legislation still needs improvement to ensure the protection of volunteers.

From 2014, a process of decentralization took place. However, in many communities, social services did not exist. The experts and professionals in the sphere of social work were lacking at those levels and volunteers helped the local government and organizations to move to the professional sphere. Many volunteers became professional volunteers; however, the process was slow because regional centres for social services did not have sufficient resources to train the volunteers. Often public organizations, such as NGOs, provided the training. This has led to a need to enhance professional standards and training, which is currently ongoing.

As a result of the conflict, Ukrainian society faces numerous social problems, such as poverty, internal displacement, unemployment, economic challenges, and trauma. The local government has limited resources to address these vast needs. Volunteers are critically important to the social service workforce and can aid in addressing the gap by supporting the government in its efforts to develop family-based care.

There is a lack of statistics on the total number of volunteers, although some are registered with the National Social Service Agency and the State Tax Service. The conflict has increased challenges facing the workforce, including the displacement of professionals and volunteers, and the increased proportion of the social service workforce who are new and inexperienced volunteers. There has also been a decrease in accessibility of family-oriented services from state and community providers. There is a lack of formed professional competencies (basic and specialized). There is no system of training and development of such competencies at the state level. According to the research conducted by the International Leadership and

Development Center (Ukraine) in 2022-2023, volunteers' burnout was high (for instance, approximately 36 percent of workers show visible signs of burnout).

There are various roles that volunteers currently play in working with children and families in Ukraine public organizations and religious organizations provide most of the volunteers. Their roles include, but are not limited to, supporting children and youth sports, and organizing cultural and educational activities. Volunteers, therefore, play an important role and this is recognized at the community-level, but the State still does not recognize volunteers as agents of the social protection system or the child and care protection system, so there is no support available for them. Volunteers can provide basic services, as well as some other more specialized services, but the resources to support them in this work, including training, are currently not available.

For professionals to work effectively, they need to work alongside volunteers who play a key supportive role in the provision of basic services. It is also necessary for paraprofessionals, paid and trained staff who lack full professional qualifications, to work within the childcare and protection sphere, as they also fulfil key auxiliary roles. In terms of ways forward, it is necessary to have training for volunteers, and to provide them with professional support and coordination (such as mentoring and supervision), to prevent burnout, and create opportunities for them to transition into professional and paid positions.

Key Recommendations

- Recognize the unique role of volunteers in supporting families and children in the community.
- Train volunteers using a competency-based approach, specifically in knowledge of the legal framework and ability to work effectively as part of the child protection system, (such as being able to develop and implement child placement plans in a manner that reduces stress for the child and caregivers, prevents trauma, and supports placement stability and permanency); and to identify and respond to cases of child abuse.
- Provide training to volunteers in psychological first aid, including on how to communicate with veterans and their families and to identify their needs and refer them to services accordingly.
- Create opportunities for the professionalization of volunteers to strengthen the social work workforce.
- Provide support to volunteers through greater coordination, training, and improved workplace support and supervision, to increase their effectiveness, reduce stress, and prevent burnout.

Session 3: What can we learn about strengthening the social service workforce in post-conflict situations, in contexts that had previously heavily relied on residential care?

There are many parallels and similarities between the current context of the Ukraine crisis and the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) pre- and post-conflict in the 1990s. Many of the social problems were similar, such as the traumatization of the general population, poverty and social exclusion, unemployment, increases in youth delinquency, gender-based and family violence, human trafficking and sexual exploitation, and substance misuse. At the same time, there was a drastic reduction in the capacities and resources of the public welfare sector to respond to these issues. There were still community-based social service providers, that had been established in the 1950s, but the conflict greatly diminished their capacities to respond.

The gap between the need and available social service capacity was filled by international organizations and non-governmental organizations acting as service providers. These actors later became key to shaping the social welfare system. One main issue with these actors, however, was their lack of consideration for the value of the local institutional structures that had remained in place, and the knowledge, experience, and expertise that was existing within the social work workforce in the national context. This is a valuable lesson learned and one that should not be repeated in the context of Ukraine. **Humanitarian projects in BiH were often designed outside of the country and based on assumptions and unverified knowledge of the real needs in the local context. This created a parallel social welfare system within the NGO sector.**

A second mistake made in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina related to the legal and policy framework for the delivery of social services. The Dayton Peace Agreement (1995) that successfully brought the war to an end did not specify the need and mandate for a central authority working in the area of social welfare. This has resulted in a social welfare system that is highly decentralized. For instance, across the different cantons of BiH there are 13 laws on social protection and 13 line ministries, for a population of 3.7 million. These decentralized bodies were not brought together through any coordinating or harmonizing mechanism that could oversee the development, adoption, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of the framework for social welfare services.

There was limited data related to the social service workforce available prior to the conflict. However, what is clear is that, the system and workforce significantly deteriorated as a result of the conflict, and it is only now that it has caught up to the needs present at the community-level. Similar to the context of Ukraine, social service workforce professionals work in poor conditions, often with low salaries. Many of them are employed on a temporary basis, and there is a significant discrepancy between the resources available to the centres for social work in urban areas compared with those in rural areas, which lack infrastructure and are often understaffed. This also increases the risk of burnout.

In relation to education and training of social workers, formal education in social work was established in 1958 and there are four departments of social work at public universities which between them run several social work degree programs at bachelor level, one master's program, and a PhD program. However, there is no national association of social workers, rather two professional associations at the entry level which are largely invisible. Overall, the reform of the social welfare sector has not been successful, owing to the lack of

consensus, and of a unified strategic vision and approach, among the many actors and stakeholders. The reform of the mental health care system was more successful because both international and national stakeholders agreed on the reform and the need to move from institutional to community-based care.

The key lessons learned and recommendations:

- External influence may have a stimulating effect on the initiation of reforms by introducing new concepts and approaches, as well as technical and economic support, including the education and training of professionals. However, there are also some problematic points that need to be addressed when deciding on and developing reform plans. Reform must be local and bottom-up starting with communities.
- Donors and countries supporting the reforms must engage with all key decision-makers at the political level and other relevant stakeholders, including national NGOs, academia and the private sector, in order to build towards and achieve sustained change.
- External intervention must be coherent, prioritized and coordinated with local stakeholders. Efforts for reconstruction, regeneration and development, that include security, political, economic, and social aspects, must be linked with peace building and democratization strategies. A systematic approach has to be developed that would combine political transformation, economic reconstruction and development strategies with peacebuilding strategies.