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POLICY BRIEF

STANDARDS, POLICY AND PRACTICE IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL WORK WITH THE FOCUS ON QUALITY ASSURANCE

The social work profession is committed to maximising the well-being of individuals and society, with social workers playing a unique role in the social and child protection system.

Committed to human rights and social justice, while working in hand-with-hand with other relevant agencies and professionals, social workers can importantly support individuals and families to cope with challenges and find solutions for them, reduce

In Kazakhstan, following the international definition, the social work is still a new academic and professional concept. However, the profession has been gradually developing, alongside with the expansion of the social protection system and particularly the adoption of the Law on Special Social Services (the Law on SSS), which presents an important milestone in this field. The Law on SSS also provides the definition of social worker and sets the requirements for further standards in this field, including those aiming at enhancing and ensuring the quality of the profession.

The Government also displays a level of dedication to strengthening the existing system, as seen with the recent draft Concept on Further Modernization of Systems of Social Services, which presents the most recent overarching guidelines for future reforms in this field, stretching from improvement of the regulatory frame-

the incidence of abuse and neglect, support families to raise their children to their full potential and thrive in their parental care wherever possible. The quality assurance of the social work has a principal objective the creation of better outcomes for service users, including children and their parents, by helping social workers to deliver the best service they can at all times. This requires a confident, competent and valued social services workforce, which is supported by enabling and creative environment and a set of mechanism necessary to ensure and support the quality of their work. These mechanisms are looked more in details in this policy brief.

work, including development of common standards, strengthen inter-agency cooperation to gradually re-orienting the system from an application to the identification approach in the provision of services. The cohesion of social work between the sectors is the main priority for the future in ensuring the consistency of the approach and understanding of professional competencies.

However, although important steps have been taken towards developing a comprehensive and stable system of social work, and while elements of the quality assurance of social work are recognised and integrated into the system, challenges, undermining the quality of the provision of social work remains. Those, in one hand, stem from the structural challenges and a way how fragmented system is organised, and are, on the other hand, influenced by the general (mis)understanding of the concept of social work and roles of social workers within the system.

The selected findings are highlighted and arranged alongside key elements required to ensure the quality of the social work and a social work system that is able to respond to the changing needs of the population, including children.



REGULATION ON THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION QUALIFICATIONS, INCLUDING THROUGH STANDARDISED AND MANDATORY CERTIFICATION, EXAMINATION AND REGISTRATION PROCEDURES

The social work profession and its roles must be officially recognized and highly regulated to allow general public and users of services to be guided, protected, informed and confident that social workers providing services are properly qualified for the job. The regulations for social work professions on qualification, including who and under which criteria can perform the social work, are considered a basis for subsequent development of the system, including quality assurance. To ensure proper regulation, standardisation, including monitoring of the profession, most countries have established mandatory registration, examination and certification of social workers, aiming at ensuring the quality and accountability of social workforce.

Although legislation provides for the definition of social work and social worker, those are not standardized across the sectors as well as they don't fully embody and correspond to the international definition and concept of the profession. For example, the definition in the Law on SSS is limiting the profession to two functions (providing SSS and/or performing needs assessment) and is missing broader conceptual framework underpinning the key principles in social work. The definition also highlights the prevailing approach of the SSS as reactive, responding when the problem has come to the surface, instead of focusing on the prevention of occurrence of social and other vulnerabilities and their early detection and intervention.

The uniformed system of registration and certification of social workers is underdeveloped due to the lack of a single body that would provide oversight over this basic quality assurance component. Although the social workers in health and social protection are required to pass a professional examination every five years, these procedures are not standardized across the country.

Furthermore, professional/legally regulated positions of social workers are located only in services for people with disabilities, health services and, as of 2017, in institutions providing services to victims of trafficking and domestic violence. However, there are several other professionals, including social pedagogues and experts of the guardianship authorities (under the Ministry of Education) as well as psychologists at the juvenile courts, school juvenile police officers, employees of the probation services and juvenile inspectors (under the Ministry of Interior), that are at least partly performing roles of social workers. Although they are governed by specific sectoral rules and regulations, the quality assurance system required for social workers does not apply to them (including professional examination). This situation negatively impacts the level of quality of social work provided across different sectors and standardisation of the profession.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen the qualification requirements, including through registration and certification of social workers, and revise the roles and responsibilities of the social workers within the system.

Uniform definition of social work and social worker that reflect the internationally recognized definition of social work, should be introduced in the relevant legislation, including in the Law on SSS. This will provide a basis of how the social work, including responsibilities and roles, are perceived and performed.

Parallel to this, strengthen and standardize the international recognized functions of social workers and adjust some of the functional responsibilities and professional roles of social workers, including in the Law on SSS and qualification requirements, to take into account potential introduction of the case management and supervision.

Also, ensure that all children have the support of an adequately qualified social worker, consider introducing the position of the professional social workers at the guardianship authorities as well as at the juvenile courts.

Standardised mandatory registration and certification should be established for all social workers and ALL other professionals performing such functions. Ideally, as it is the practice in several other countries, this process should be carried out by a specialised professional body in the field of social protection/social work (i.e., Social Work Council). This should take into account requirements, such as adequate qualifications (i.e. ideally, university level graduate programme accredited by the recognised national institution working in the field of social protection/social work), adherence to the nation-wide accepted social work codes of conduct, passing of the professional examination in the required field of speciality, and, as is the case in many countries, also concluding mandatory traineeship period. Registration and certification of social workers ensure that only qualified and certified social workers, who are fulfilling a set of qualification requirements and have necessary skills and knowledge are allowed to perform this role.



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PROCESSES OF CARE AND SERVICE PROVISION GUIDING SOCIAL WORKERS IN THEIR WORK

Clear steps and processes of care/service delivery should be developed, guiding the social workers in their work, including enhancing their accountability. This includes institutionalising case management, which allows for organising and carrying out work to address an individual child's (and their family's) needs in an appropriate, systematic and timely manner, through direct support and/or clear referral pathways, as well as clarified roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder. Institutionalising this approach tends to lead to more harmonized and collaborative process and can address the fragmentation of the provision of services.



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One of the biggest weakness of the system is that the case management, which is internationally seen as the best practice in the provision of social work, is not institutionalised in the policies, provision and monitoring of special social services and social work. Selected agencies have developed case management models, including as part of the UNICEF-supported pilot projects in the field of health care. However, those models need to be further examined to see their potential application across sectors.

Consequently, the processes of care/service delivery remain vague and not adequately developed and standardised. Although algorithms have been developed to guide social work in health care, currently there are no officially adopted algorithms for the provision of specific services and a clear continuum of care.

Furthermore, different sectors have developed their own tools and forms guiding the work of social workers, lacking the standardisation across the sectors. While the Ministry of Health has developed the most comprehensive documentation and reporting requirements for social workers in health care, including initial risk assessments, the experts in educational sector (social teachers and experts of guardianship authority) appear to be performing their work under very limited guidance and tools, including no forms for individual plans for work with the beneficiaries appear to exist and are used by these practitioners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop a clear process of care and service provision, including referral pathways and clearly allocated responsibilities, ideally through the adoption of the case management approach.

In this regard, the current processes of care/service delivery need to be reconsidered, and case management approach as the principle approach in social work and provision of special social services that spans across all sectors should be institutionalized. This would require developing a standardised case management procedure that will be applied for all children receiving special social services and/or registered within the system, including developing of a single standardised package of procedures and documents. In this regard, the applicability of already developed case management packages and standards within existing pilot projects should be assessed. Introduction of such approach would have a beneficial impact on several levels, ranging from accountability, improved coordination to more guided and supported social work.

There is a need to develop standards and practical work guidelines, following international good practices, for all the professional working in special social services and/or child protection. This should particularly concern experts of the guardianship authorities and psychologist at the juvenile courts, for whom no standards guiding their work appears to be developed. This should include, among others, provision of clear roles and responsibilities, qualification requirements, continuous professional development as well as forms guiding their work. The development of new standards should be coordinated and aligned with existing standards and work guidelines. To increase awareness and understanding of the specific entitlements of service users as well as providers, develop a Catalogue of all Special Social Services as they cut across all sector and institutions, as well as ensure that each organisation/provider of social services has updated list of services available through the public institutions and NGOs.

Additionally, also consider translating/adopting selected standards relevant for children into documents, which emphasises the point of view of children or young people who use the services, e.g. describe in a child-friendly manner what each individual child or young person can expect from the service provider.



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CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRAININGS OF SOCIAL WORKERS AND OTHERS PERFORMING SUCH ROLES

Working as a social worker can offer many personal rewards. However, positions can also be very demanding, complex, emotionally charged, and stressful. With the combination of the right skills, education, and experience, a social worker can significantly improve the lives of children and other individuals throughout the community. For this, social workers must receive adequate ongoing professional support and training to fulfil – and to be seen to fulfil – those roles effectively.

Although the numbers are increasing, there is still a lack of properly qualified and well-trained social workers. The findings of the recent needs assessment carried out by UNICEF highlighted, for example, that only a fifth of all correspondents had appropriate qualification for performing social work, meanwhile only half of them had necessary training and skills to do a good work with families with children, while the capacity gaps have been established on several levels (i.e., inter-agency cooperation, the opening and the closure of the processes of assistance and support, the development of individual plans, an organization of support in accordance with the risk levels, etc.).

This reflects the situation in which existing capacity building opportunities for social workers appears to be patchy, and resource dependent, while concerns have been raised regarding their quality (particularly in social protection). There is a limited oversight over the quality of the provided trainings, while the standards do not provide sufficiently detailed and standardized requirements for

This includes supervision, which is internationally recognised as an integral part of the training and continuous education, to support practitioners in ensuring delivery of the high-quality services. Alongside continuous education, university level social work education plays a vital role in shaping the profession's future through the education of competent professionals, generation of knowledge, and the exercise of leadership within the professional community.

continuous professional development of social workers and other professionals performing this work.

Crucially, the mechanisms of supervision are not established in the law and policy (while the concept tends to be misunderstood) and are practiced only as a result of UNICEF-supported projects or individual initiatives in selected institutions (e.g., social workers in health in some policlinics in Astana and Kyzylorda).

University level education in the speciality of social work lacks practical orientation and on site-practice, including weak linkages between the education and potential employers, and is seen as not equipping social workers with necessary skills and knowledge. Although the accreditation procedures of the social work programmes exist in national standards, the current accreditation and quality assurance procedures of the university and college programmes appear not to be rigorous enough, with no external professional body – such as Council of Social Work – approving and ensuring that the academic programmes are fulfilling necessary quality standards. This kind of external “accreditation” is a common practice in many other countries with an established social work system.

In terms of the policy changes, current standards on continuous professional development in the field of social work need to be revised, to establish a clear accreditation system as well as setting more clear criteria for mandatory trainings (i.e. duration, quality aspects of the programmes, qualification of trainers, monitoring and evaluation component). In this regard, the requirements on the periodic attendance at the trainings should be revised (i.e., at least 48 hours for a period of every two years, with a right to attend extensive advance training every five years). This will provide a basis for a clear roadmap for continuous education of social workers (and, ideally, also other professionals performing this role).

To provide for a smoother transition between the education and work life, the introduction of the obligatory paid “traineeship” for all social workers (and other professionals performing their role), who will begin, for the first time, working in the institutions providing special social services, should be considered. This will require the development of the necessary standards governing this field, including setting clear criteria, such as

duration, conditions and programme of the traineeship, qualification requirements and responsibilities of the mentors, assessment of the completed traineeship, documentation requirements and a body responsible for monitoring and supervision.

The mandatory supervision in all institutions providing special social services/concerned with child protection should be institutionalized through necessary law, standards and regulations detailing the processes, including qualification requirements of supervisors. This should be followed by the creation of the network of accredited (external and internal) supervisors, who will be capacitated and capable to offer quality supervisory work.

Furthermore, it needs to be ensured that all university and college programmes with the speciality of social work are competency-based degree programmes, which are responsive to increasingly evolving complex professional demands of social workers, with the efforts made not only to take into account modern requirements, but also predict how they will change in future. The programmes should be organised to developed two types of competencies, i.e. generic and subject-specific, needed for a professional career in the field of social work. To address this gap in a short run, the development of a Guidelines of competence development in the study field of social work, based on international standards and competence frameworks, could be considered. The guidelines should guide and allowing universities to self-assess current programmes and their compatibility with the standards. These guidelines could be also used by the Department of Higher, Post-Graduate Education and International Cooperation or another body that is currently responsible for oversight in this field.

However, in the long run, the responsibility for oversight and accreditation of the programmes should be ideally transferred to a specialised body in the field of social work (i.e., an Association of Social Workers or even a Resource Centre for Social Work planned to be established in a near future), ensuring quality and standardization of knowledge.



RECOMMENDATIONS

System for continuous professional development and trainings should be strengthened, including through the introduction of supervision, to enable social workers to be adequately equipped and on top of the latest methodologies and practice within the profession.



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amount of work required to successfully manage assigned cases and bring them to closure) can make a major contribution to the provision of quality services, reduction of burnouts and turnovers, and ensuring a positive outcome for children and other individuals.

to be insufficient, as well as caseload provided for social workers performing services at home (4 to 6 children per social worker). Additionally, no algorithms for the provision of special social services exists, which would provide a basis for calculation of a reasonable workload.

Furthermore, the social position of social workers is relatively low, and profession is considered as unattractive and associated mostly with a narrow set of services (i.e., targeting only people with disabilities and elderly people). All this is impacting the quality of the service provided, leading to the occupational burnouts and high turnout of personnel as well as creating conditions in which it is difficult to attract committed and skilled personnel.

Necessary steps need to be taken to make the profession of the social worker more attractive and competitive, including by establishing additional incentives for professionals working in this field (an increase of the surcharge to the salary, increase of the paid leave days, flexible working hours, awareness raising and promotional component, etc..).

Furthermore, workload study to provide guidance on the number of staff required and their workload should be initiated. The study, by comparing how much time is available to complete one case with how much time is spent or should be spent completing it, can also help to improve management of the work procedures.

However, to immediately address challenges in working conditions, the staff standards for social workers in home care should be revised as well the staff norms for social teachers, where those are not set, should be introduced.

Furthermore, the use of technology can importantly strengthen and improve the management of processes of providing care and services, including social work. Although the roll-out might be progressive and taking into account different levels of accessibility to internet and necessary equipment, the ICT-based tools can importantly support workers to better manage their workload (i.e., to access information that supports decision-making, document work more efficiently, communicate with supervisors, and families and make more efficient use of waiting time).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Steps should be taken to create positive working conditions for social workers, including reasonable caseloads and workloads should be set and adequate resources (human and material), should be invested in the profession.

WORKING ENVIRONMENT AND WORKING CONDITIONS OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Social workers practice in situations of extreme complexity and necessity and need to be supported with the adequate working conditions, including they should receive fair remuneration and other benefits. Furthermore, the adoption and implementation of policies on caseload (i.e., number of cases assigned to an individual worker in a given time period) and workload (i.e., the

The working conditions of social workers have been assessed as inadequate, including they receive low salaries and are placed in unequal positions in regards to the remuneration policies and other benefits compared to other professionals performing a similar role within and between sectors. The remuneration policies also do not appear to be adequately taking into account the skills, qualifications and the level of responsibilities.

Additionally, the required work norms for social workers, as well as other professionals performing such roles are not set or are insufficient (i.e., the workload is not set for social workers, while there is no ratio, caseload or workload provided for the social teachers in schools, experts of guardianship authorities, probation officer, etc.). The ratio one social worker in health per 10.000 inhabitants appears



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MECHANISMS ENSURING PROFESSIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY OF SOCIAL WORKERS

In order to safeguard the quality of provided social work, a mechanism for ensuring professional accountability of the social workers needs to be set. This would, at the basic, include nation-wide codes of conduct, which aims to establish the ethical responsibilities of all social workers with respect to themselves, clients, colleagues, employees, employing organizations and profession in general. There is also a need for

Currently, there are no codes of conduct developed and adopted for social workers or other professionals performing this function, as well as there is no body with an oversight function in this field.

Furthermore, although certain standards provide indicators, the performance indicators to monitor how well the services are performing in meeting the needs of service users and to measure their efficiency and value for money are largely missing.

Although standards provide for some elements of accountability (audits, standardized processes of complaint on the provision of public services as set by law, feedback for participants in some of the forms), current complaint procedures appear not to fully institutionalised, including there is a general lack of child-friendly complaint

a set of performance indicators to monitor how well the services are performing in meeting the needs of service users and to measure their efficiency and value for money. Furthermore, adequate complaint and feedback procedures need to be developed, including child-friendly mechanisms, which would allow beneficiaries to share their concerns, if those arise, as well as allow for feedback on the quality of provided services.

mechanisms, which would allow beneficiaries to share their concerns, if those arise, as well as allow for feedback on the quality of provided services.

Equally, the monitoring of the compliance of service providers with a set standard appears to be weak, and there is no special institution that would be responsible for ensuring this on the operational level.

The development of nation-wide codes of conduct for social workers should be a participatory and inclusive process, with a foreseen followed-up steps, allowing for the implementation of the codes (awareness raising and capacity building, inclusion in the relevant curriculums, complaint mechanism provided, etc.). Ideally, the codes should be developed under the guidance and oversight of the Association of Social Workers that should, ideally, have in place mechanisms enabling monitoring compliance of social workers with the code, as well as established complaint and mediation mechanism.

Furthermore, other accountability mechanisms in the provision of social work need to be strengthened, including it needs to be ensured that all organizations providing special social services have accessible complaint mechanisms. This should include child-friendly mechanisms of complaint and feedback.

There is also a room to improve monitoring of the performance and effectiveness of the professionals involved in the delivery of the SSS through developing and using agreed national and local level performance indicators.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The individual accountability of the social workers needs to be strengthened, including by developing codes of conduct and supporting mechanisms for monitoring their implementation.

Furthermore, there is a need to strengthen the existing Association of Social Workers, particularly its credibility and legitimacy among its membership base. For this purpose, consider carry out a national wide survey among its existing and potential members on the ways forward (including on its management, role, priority areas, its mandate, etc.), ensuring that the findings of the survey will be reflected in the follow-up steps. When it gains sufficient credibility, consider transferring some of the quality assurance components to the Association, such as registration of the professional social workers, accreditation and quality assurance of the university programmes, as well as developing and ensuring compliance with the codes of conduct.



function under the mandate of one single ministry, as the issues dealt with by social workers are usually so complex that agencies working alone are generally ineffective in achieving good outcomes.

memorandums of understandings. Furthermore, each of the ministries is developing its own information management system, with little interaction and information sharing between them, leading to duplication and fragmentation of the available information.

The provisions on coordination and cooperation in the relevant laws and policies need to be strengthened, including, as a start, by replacing, the word “interaction” with “cohesion, cooperation and coordination”.

However, as mentioned above, significant improvement of cohesion, cooperation and coordination can be achieved by introducing and institutionalising the case management approach, across all services and provision of social work in all settings. This approach has built-in mechanisms to strengthen cooperation.

To additionally strengthen inter-agency cooperation, for the cases assessed as high-risk cases, the mandatory calling of the multidisciplinary teams should be considered, with the case manager being responsible for calling and coordinating such teams. This should be followed by clear regulations and guidance on the operation of the teams, sharing of responsibilities, budget allocations, risk assessment processes, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, costing, follow-up procedures, etc.

A clear Memorandum of understanding and/or service level agreements among different service providers, distinctly outlining the cases and rules of referrals, should be considered to be developed.

Additionally, the data collection system in the field of special social services should be strengthened, including a joint database on the provision of SSS across all sector should be created, allowing for the exchange of the information at the different levels and, consequently creating conditions for more coordinated and responsive interventions.

COHESION, COOPERATION AND COORDINATION IN THE PROVISION OF SOCIAL WORK ON ALL LEVELS

Institutionalised cohesion, cooperation and coordination between and within the agencies, including professionals co-operating across different sectors (including social services, education, health and law enforcement agencies) is necessary to ensure that the children, particularly those with complex and multiple needs, are afforded an adequate care as well as that available resources are used efficiently and effectively. In this regard, the social work cannot be treated as a singular

Although each individual ministry has made important progress, current developments are sectorial and lacking a long-term vision of one integrated social and child protection system, in which the services across all the ministries are aligned and are working with common goals, which is, among others, protection of the rights and the best interests of the children. In this regard, the system is fragmented, sectorial and tends to work in silos, with ministries of health, education and social protection each developing their own standards for the provision of special social services and requirements and qualifications of social workers/social teachers within in.

Although almost all standards provide requirements for interaction/cooperation with relevant agencies/stakeholders in the provision of SSS, there are no legal frameworks to regulate interagency-social work on site, including there is no requirement to establish multidisciplinary teams in high-risk cases. No documents guiding referral paths are adopted, while the cooperation among different services, statutory as well as private, is mostly performed without developed

RECOMMENDATIONS

Establish a single coherent system in which both, governmental and non-governmental service providers are able to coordinate and cooperate with one another and to link community-based social services.

Note:

This policy brief presents analysis and policy recommendations for improving the quality aspect of social work in Kazakhstan in a short and accessible format. It aims to inform high-level policymaking and debates, enhancing research and providing recommendations for decision-makers at the national, regional and local levels. The policy brief is the result of UNICEF Kazakhstan consultancy on a review of Standards, policy and practice in the field of social work with the focus on quality assurance. For background and more details, see the full report. The policy brief was developed by Anita Ramsak, PhD.

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