

# CONCEPT NOTE

Europe and Central Asia  
regional conference on  
planning, developing and  
supporting the social work  
and social service workforce

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# Background to the conference goals and objectives

The existence of a competent social work and wider social service workforce is a key pillar of social protection and child protection systems including effective prevention and response to violence, poverty, discrimination, social exclusion and a range of other systemic social and economic challenges for children and families and vulnerable adults.

The development of social work and social services in the Europe and Central Asia<sup>1</sup> (ECA) region reflects the global situation with great variation in the situation across the region as to the types of social services that have developed, how social work is defined and the extent to which social work has developed as a profession and an academic discipline. Differences in defining social services, social workers and other social welfare workers in each country make it difficult to understand the extent of the workforce deployed in each country of the region<sup>2</sup>. Differences in the language that is used to describe the people who work in social services or in allied sectoral services such as health and education also contribute to a confused picture of the state of the workforce in many countries.

The countries of the region face common problems and challenges including child neglect and exploitation, poverty, social exclusion, violence against women and children (including domestic violence and child marriage), ageing, migration, youth unemployment, but there are important political, social and cultural differences which influence how each country addresses these issues, including through social work and social services. This is reflected in how the workforce is defined and deployed. Most countries in the region now have definitions of social work anchored in legislation and have social work education programmes at Bachelor degree level as a minimum<sup>3</sup>.

In many countries of the ECA region there are workers in statutory social work positions, such as child protection decision-makers, who do not have social work education or training as the legislation and policy framework does not recognise the need for these types of professionals in such positions. In other countries, legislation states that only qualified social workers are permitted to work in such statutory child protection positions, but resource challenges or other factors make it difficult for these regulations to be implemented. In many countries of the region social workers and other social service workers are poorly paid and work in challenging environments and there are low levels of trust in the workforce as they are perceived as fulfilling inspection roles or 'taking away children' and this can affect take up of social services.<sup>4</sup>

Professional social workers, who have a degree in social work that meet international standards, have the competencies to be able to transform the lives of their clients or the communities where they work, in the same way that a competent teacher or doctor can. This is reflected in

<sup>1</sup> Geographic scope for the regional conference is defined based on the UNICEF ECA region. This includes all of the countries of Europe to the west across to the central Asian countries in the east; however, the regional conference focuses mainly on the 21 countries in the region where UNICEF has country offices <https://www.unicef.org/eca/where-we-work>

<sup>2</sup> Rogers et al, Desk Review for Regional conference on social service workforce, UNICEF ECARO, 2018

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

the definition of social work of the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work:

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing”<sup>5</sup>.

Not all social welfare sector positions need to have this level of competency, but in some positions only professionals with this level of competency can discharge the responsibilities of the position. **A key challenge for the governments of the region is to clearly define the functions required for statutory social work, usually requiring assessment and decision-making, and to ensure that the workers fulfilling these functions are equipped with the competencies (skills, knowledge and behaviours) to be able to execute these functions.**

In most countries of the region, social services are delivered both by government and non-government service providers. In some countries, the government engages non-government organisations (NGOs) through social contracts or other funding mechanisms to provide specialised social services to specific vulnerable groups such as children experiencing violence, children with disabilities, street-connected children and children living with HIV. In many countries, civil social organisations and NGOs have been pathfinders in creating new services and have the competencies needed to work with some of the most vulnerable marginalized and excluded populations. Some governments recognise the expertise of such NGOs and the role they can play in building workforce competencies. Other governments could encourage greater engagement of NGOs in workforce strengthening and social service provision.

The Global Social Service Workforce Alliance (GSSWA) identifies planning, developing and supporting as key actions required for workforce strengthening globally<sup>6</sup> and this applies also to the ECA region. Planning to ensure the deployment of workers with the right competencies in the right positions throughout the country including in rural or hard-to-reach areas, in government and NGO services, is a major challenge in most countries. Like their colleagues globally, social workers and other social welfare workers in the ECA region also tend to be underpaid and to work in challenging environments with limited infrastructure and transport that compromises their ability to fulfil their designated functions<sup>7</sup>.

Using a regional desk review and four country case studies from Albania, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Romania, **the ECA Regional social work and social service workforce conference aims to deliver a call to action that:**

- **Makes the case for systematic investment in workforce strengthening as a strategic and sustainable approach to ensuring better outcomes for children.**
- Reflects the principles of social work and **the competencies that are needed among social workers and the wider social service workforce** to coordinate and plan

<sup>5</sup> IFSW, IASSW (2014) The Global Social Service Workforce Alliance (GSSWA) identifies planning, developing and supporting

<sup>6</sup> Framework for Strengthening the Social Service Workforce (2010)

<sup>7</sup> Rogers et al, Desk Review for Regional conference on social sector workforce, UNICEF ECARO, 2018

together across sectors and disciplines, build relationships of trust with and reach out to the most vulnerable populations to strengthen community engagement and inclusion

- Furthers achievement on **a range of goals on social inclusion, poverty reduction and ending violence and discrimination for both children and adults.**

Table 1 proposes definitions and gives (non-exhaustive) examples of different types of workers identified in the four case studies and a regional desk review, that are deployed in the social welfare systems of the region in both government and non-government social services. **These definitions are proposed for discussion at the conference** in order to underpin a regional call to action on workforce strengthening and a framework for monitoring progress across the countries of the region. The conference proceedings and the resulting call to action will address the following key issues for the region:

- **Defining important statutory positions<sup>8</sup> and the competencies needed to fulfil statutory functions** and deliver specialised social services
- Defining the important social functions that **paraprofessionals and allied professionals are performing** and highlight the **relevant social competencies** and capacity required in health, education, justice, social assistance and other sectors that **can strengthen effectiveness in achieving common outcomes for children.**

Furthermore, the following definition of social services<sup>9</sup>, whether delivered by government or non-government organisations, is proposed for discussion at the conference as a basis for developing a regional framework on social service workforce development:

A social service can be defined as a set of complex actions undertaken to meet the social needs of a person/ family in order to overcome difficult life circumstances and to prevent social exclusion.

**Table 1 Emerging typology of the social work and social service workforce in the ECA region**

Type of worker	Definition	Examples of workers in government or non-government services in the region
<b>Certified social workers</b>	Have completed a three year bachelor degree in social work or an equivalent certification process and are professionally practicing social work in statutory positions or in any type of social service	Statutory social workers in Georgia; child protection workers in Albania; social workers in schools in Albania; social workers in Centres for Social Work in Serbia, BiH, Croatia, Montenegro; social workers in community health teams in Kazakhstan; case managers in child protection departments in Romania; social workers in residential institutions; youth workers; social workers employed by local authorities or NGOs

<sup>8</sup> Statutory positions are defined in this table as positions designated in national legislation and carrying mandatory identification, assessment and intervention/referral functions

<sup>9</sup> In view of the intersecting nature of services required by children and adults in the context of the ECA region, the proposal is to adopt an approach which defines social services as those that are targeted to vulnerable populations who have additional needs for support and which also assist them to gain equitable access to universal services, including health, education, housing, employment. So in this region health and education services are not classified as 'social services' but school inclusion or health mediation services, for example, might be classified as 'social services'.



		delivering specialized social services to vulnerable populations with complex needs such as drop-in shelters for battered women or street kids.
<b>Uncertified social workers</b>	Do not have a degree in social work or an equivalent certificate and who are fulfilling statutory social worker functions or are practicing social work in any type of social service	Child protection workers in Kazakhstan; statutory social workers in Albania and Georgia who have not yet undergone certification; carers in residential institutions; youth workers; outreach workers on a local HIV prevention program for at-risk adolescents.
<b>Para-professionals</b>	Non-professionals that have to undergo certain types of training and certification and have a statutory role or play an important role in social services – usually trained and supervised by certified or uncertified social workers who run the social services in which they are deployed	Personal assistants for persons with disabilities or chronic health conditions; Roma health mediators in Bulgaria, Serbia or Romania; foster carers or small group home house-parents in Georgia or maternal assistants in Romania; care assistants in residential institutions; youth workers; community mediators engaged in outreach work with street-connected children and youth; teaching assistants for children with special educational needs in schools in Albania
<b>Allied professionals</b>	Other professionals working in statutory positions or social services who have professional qualifications and standards regulated outside of social work or the social service sector	Psychologists in family support or alternative care services in Georgia, Romania, Albania, Kazakhstan; lawyers in family support centres in Georgia and Romania; social pedagogues and police inspectors in schools in Kazakhstan; social pedagogues in schools Kyrgyzstan; psychologists working in schools in Albania; youth workers; community Mayors in Moldova who have statutory responsibilities for child protection.

Source: OPM/UNICEF ECARO conference reference group

Some types of workers, such as youth workers, might belong in all four categories as they may be qualified social workers working in specialised services with youth or they may be para-professionals focused on youth inclusion whose main qualifications are that they are accessible and trusted by the vulnerable populations. Some countries may have a separate cadre of youth workers with its own professional qualification and regulation system working in statutory positions or specialised youth services. Social workers employed by women's NGOs may similarly manage shelters for women and children victims of violence, and/or engage in policy advocacy and legislative reform critical to strengthening protection mechanisms

The social work and social service workforce described in Table 1 interacts very closely with other allied professionals and workers in a range of other sectors including social assistance, early childhood development, health, education, law enforcement, gender equality and empowerment of women and girls and justice. In many cases, these other professionals may be the first point of contact for vulnerable populations and may have some statutory social work or social policy functions and responsibilities such as outreach, early identification and referral to other services. For the purpose of clarity in creating a regional framework for monitoring the workforce, it is important, therefore, to establish as clearly as possible which cadres of workers

are considered part of the social service workforce and which are not. Home-visiting nurses in many countries of the region for example have some functions that can be described as belonging to social work or social policy areas such as early identification of neglect, abuse or violence and referral to child or adult protective services. Their main functions, however, and their professional education and training and supervision belong to the health sector. Adding social work or social service functions does not necessarily mean these workers are part of the social service workforce. It may mean nevertheless that they require additional training and development to ensure they are competent to execute these functions.

Table 2 describes examples of some of the allied professions (non-exhaustive) identified in the four country case studies and regional desk review or by UNICEF ECA regional advisors and their functional links to the social welfare workforce.

**Table 2 Emerging typology of the allied professions outside of social services or statutory positions and their links to the social service workforce**

Allied profession	Type of worker	Functions related to the social service workforce
<b>Health</b>	Home visiting nurse	Early identification and intervention in child protection and early childhood development; supports access to social services; joint casework
	Psychiatrist	Referrals to and from social services; joint casework
	Family doctor or general practitioner	Referrals to and from social services; early identification and intervention in child protection; joint casework
	Physiotherapists, occupational and speech therapists	Supporting social inclusion and participation (including in education settings) of persons with disabilities or with chronic health conditions
	School nurses	Early identification and referrals to and from social services and child protection services
	Emergency room doctors and nurses	Identification of violence, abuse and neglect; referrals to and from social services and child protection services.
	Other specialist health workers such as narcologist or gynaecologist	Referrals to and from social services and joint casework where addiction issues, sexual violence, underage pregnancy are a factor.
<b>Education</b>	Early childhood development worker or Youth and child care worker	Early identification and intervention in child protection; supporting social inclusion; referrals to and from social services
	Teacher	Identification and referral to social services; joint casework; support social inclusion
	Social pedagogues	Supporting inclusion and participation in education; joint casework
	School psychologist	Early identification and referrals to and from social services and child protection services

		(might also be in Table 1 if they have a statutory role)
	Teaching assistants	Roma education mediators/teaching assistants in schools in Serbia.
	Deputy directors with responsibilities for 'upbringing'	Identification and referral to social services and social assistance; in-school programmes such as hot lunches and homework clubs; support participation and social inclusion; joint casework
<b>Psychology</b>	Psychologist	Individual and group consultations and treatment e.g. in family support services; participation in casework and child protection
<b>Justice</b>	Police	Referral to social services; participation in case work, justice and child protection.
	Judge	Referral to family support, alternative care, protective services; decision-making and case management
	Parole/probation officers	Referral to social services; supporting social inclusion; joint case work.
<b>Social assistance</b>	Social assistance administrators	Linking people receiving cash benefits to social services; identification and referral to child or adult protective services; supporting social inclusion; joint case work.
<b>Youth work</b>	Youth worker	Referral to and from social services and child protection; joint casework; supporting social inclusion; accompaniment services for excluded young people.
<b>Community work and local public administration</b>	Community mayor or Head of village administration	Referral to and from social services; mobilizing community resources; supporting social inclusion.
	Representatives of community religious groups; civil society organisations or informal community groups	Early identification; referral to and from social services; mobilising community resources; supporting social inclusion

Source: OPM/UNICEF ECARO conference reference group

Social workers generally work in social services, although they can also be deployed in services in other sectors such as health and education. Table 3 describes the types of social services in the ECA region where different types of social work and social service cadres and allied professionals are deployed or could be deployed. The level of intervention primary, secondary or tertiary indicates the level of specialisation of the service. As a rule, primary level services partially targeted to specific vulnerable populations and are closely linked to universal services such as health or education, secondary level services are more targeted and specialized and



tertiary level services are highly specialised.<sup>10</sup> Also as a rule, primary services are more likely to be inter-sectoral in nature and involve outreach and community based approaches while secondary and tertiary services are more likely to be staffed by professional social workers and allied professionals.

**Table 3 Emerging typology and classification of social services in the ECA Region where the workforce and allied professionals are deployed.**

Level of intervention	Type of service	Examples from the region
<b>Primary</b>	Community based, outreach support services, based in or linked to universal services such as health or education or to other local authority structures accessible to the whole population.	Visiting nurses in many countries of the region; social pedagogues in schools in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; psychologists and social workers in schools in Albania
<b>Secondary</b>	Community based, outreach, more specialized support services targeting particular populations such as low income households; very remote or deprived communities; single parents; children or adults with disabilities or chronic health conditions; minority communities; youth.	Community Social Assistants in Moldova and Employment and Social Support Offices in Kazakhstan; community health teams in Kazakhstan; multi-functional community centres in Moldova and Romania; family support centres in Georgia, Romania, Moldova, Albania; education inclusion services in Albania and Serbia; Roma health and education mediation services; personal assistant and independent living services in Albania and Moldova; youth services.
<b>Tertiary</b>	Community based or residential services providing highly specialized services to populations with specialized needs.	Child protection services; alternative care services including kinship care, foster care and residential care; adoption services; domestic violence services; shelters; services for street connected children; residential education services for children with disabilities or chronic health conditions.

Source: OPM/UNICEF ECARO conference reference group

In many countries around the world, access to social services is based on an assessment by qualified social workers. Social services and the descriptions of functions ascribed to them in each country of the ECA region are very diverse. Similarly, the way that the social work/social service workforce is structured and how roles, functions and job titles are defined in each setting across the region varies considerably. Currently, the terms social worker, social assistant and

<sup>10</sup> See for example Childnomics Conceptual Framework, 2017, p10 [https://www.eurochild.org/fileadmin/public/06\\_Projects/Childnomics/Childnomics\\_-\\_Conceptual\\_Framework\\_31018.pdf](https://www.eurochild.org/fileadmin/public/06_Projects/Childnomics/Childnomics_-_Conceptual_Framework_31018.pdf) ; UNICEF, 2015 Family and Parenting Support p71, [https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/01%20family\\_support\\_layout\\_web.pdf](https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/01%20family_support_layout_web.pdf)

social welfare worker are used in different countries in different ways. The concept of a paraprofessional is used in some countries of the region and not in others.

These differences are key to understanding how to continue building synergetic and holistic support systems in the ECA region. As preparations for the regional conference progress, and during the conference itself, the intention will be to define these terms more precisely with the aim of proposing a set of terms and definitions that can be useful across the ECA region. A workforce strengthening framework will be developed ahead of the conference, building on the four case studies and preliminary consultations with country offices. Recognising the challenges in developing a meaningful, coherent regional call to action and framework, the conference team will consult with UNICEF country offices and their partners as far as possible ahead of and during the conference in order to build a reasonable level of consensus and a basis for support for a concerted and strategic regional effort on workforce strengthening, while allowing for individual country flexibility and adaptation.

It should be emphasised that the intention is not to focus on any particular issue or vulnerable group that is driving the need for a strong social work/social service workforce (e.g. violence, gender, disability, children without parental care or children of compulsory school age out of school), but to focus **across all sectors** on the needed workforce functions and competencies and actions required for strengthening the workforce to ensure it can address a range of social challenges.

## The conference

### 2.1. Brief Description

The regional conference will be held on November 21 - 23, 2018 in Bucharest, hosted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Justice of the Government of Romania and the National Agency for the Protection Children's Rights and Adoptions (NAPCRA) together with UNICEF Europe and Central Asia (ECA) Regional Office. It will be a two-and-a-half-day high-level event bringing together government officials, academics, civil society representatives and other stakeholders from across Europe and Central Asia to further understanding, commitment and planning for a trained, resourced, skilled, decentralized and well-supported social work and social service workforce.

Participants will come from a range of sectors including child protection, health, education, social protection, early childhood development, migration, justice and youth, and will encourage constructive exchange and facilitate a shared regional vision for taking forward social work/social service workforce development.

The thematic focus will be on how the 21 participating countries<sup>11</sup> can plan, support and develop both social work and the wider social service workforce in a comprehensive, systemic and multi-sectoral way.

The conference agenda will be informed and shaped by a desk review, four country case studies and examples of promising practice from across the region.

Days 1 and 2 of the conference will comprise plenary, panel and group discussions on a range of priority issues, with the aim of achieving consensus around a regional Call for Action on Day 3.

## 2.2. Goal, objectives and themes

The **goal of the conference** is to establish a platform for strengthening social work and the social service workforce across the region and to develop common principles and a regional agenda for identifying priorities, addressing challenges and taking action in each country.

The **specific objectives** of the conference are:

1. To identify common challenges across the region and strategies to address them drawing on four country case studies, participant discussions, and other examples;
2. To develop a shared understanding among participants around a social work/social service workforce strengthening framework focused on the functions of key statutory and social service positions and the competencies required to fulfil them
3. To seek consensus on principles for taking forward planning, developing and supporting the workforce with statutory and social service function;
4. To identify indicators and effective approaches to monitoring and measuring progress in social service workforce strengthening across the region.

It is hoped that the participating stakeholders from 21 countries will – individually and as a group – leave the conference with:

- An increased level of awareness of challenges and promising practices from across the region through information exchange;
- An increased understanding of diverse and effective models of social work/social service workforce planning, development and support;
- Active involvement in sharing perspectives and opinions on addressing common challenges including inter-sectoral coordination;
- An increased understanding and conviction that more and better developed and supported social workers/social service workers deployed across a range of sectors can be effective in achieving a range of social inclusion, children protection and other policy goals linked to international and regional commitments including: Conventions on the Rights of the Child, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the European Union Human Rights Agenda, the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combatting violence against

<sup>11</sup> Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo (UNSCR 1244), Kyrgyzstan, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan.

women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention) and the Sustainable Development Goals;

- Active contributions through discussion to the development of a competency framework for the social work/social service workforce and mechanisms for developing competencies in the short, medium and long-term perspective;
- Active contributions to the formulation and endorsement of a 'Call for Action' on social work/social service workforce strengthening and a set of indicators that can be used as a basis for monitoring progress across the region.

### Main themes

Participants will contribute to a **regional call to action** and a **monitoring framework**. The former will outline a regional vision and commitment to investing in social work/social service workforce strengthening through planning, developing and supporting and the latter will define key indicators and milestones for measuring progress. The content of the conference will be structured around defining the functions and competencies of the workforce and around seeking consensus on principles in planning, developing and supporting as key actions in the regional social work/social service workforce strengthening framework.

Day 1 of the conference will focus on **defining the workforce and planning**. Key subthemes may include: defining important statutory functions of the workforce and the competencies needed to execute them; strategic planning for the social service workforce; financing social services and using HR data in decision-making to support workforce financing; inter-ministerial coordination of workforce planning; planning for mixed social service markets including non-government service providers; strengthening legislative frameworks and improving resource allocation to strengthen and support the social service workforce including in specific sectors.

Day 2 of the conference will focus on **developing**. Key subthemes may include: designing pre-service education and in-service training programmes that are aligned with needs as identified by workforce assessments including the need for inter-sectoral coordination in practice; developing appropriate curricula; and strengthening faculty and teaching methods; ensuring that supply of cadres meets demand through links to planning systems; joint multi-disciplinary training and other ways to develop a workforce strong in inter-sectoral coordination.

Day 3 of the conference will focus on **supporting**. Key subthemes may include: ensuring adequate investments in working environments; effective approaches to effective policies and practices for staff induction and orientation, supervision, mentoring, job satisfaction, and retention; the role of professional associations in supporting the professional growth and development of the social service workforce.

## 2.3. Target audience, languages and format

### Target countries and participants

Participants from the target countries will be senior officials from government (agency and department heads, deputy ministers), academics and civil society representatives working across a range of sectors including health, education, social welfare/protection, child protection, early childhood development, migration, justice, disability/chronic health conditions, community development, gender and minorities with the aim of promoting inter-sectoral collaboration and impact-driven solutions to social work/social service workforce development.

### **Logistical arrangements**

Participation in the conference will be by-invitation only and the estimated number of delegates will be between 120 and 150.

### **Working languages**

The conference languages are English, Romanian and Russian.

### **Format**

The aim will be to ensure a balance of plenary and panel discussions with interactive parallel sections and opportunities for maximizing interaction between participants. Each session will be led by a chair and supported by resource persons who will provide prepared contributions. A rapporteur will take notes from each session in order to capture contributions and key points.