

Regional Guidance on Strengthening the Role of Social Workers and the Wider Social Service Workforce in Social Protection

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1. Introduction

Purpose of Regional Guidance

This ASEAN guidance is intended to support policy makers, managers and members of the social service workforce in ASEAN Member States to strengthen the role of social workers and the wider social service workforce in and for social protection systems. The guidance provides general information about the regional situation relating to the social service workforce in social protection and general recommendations on how to strengthen (plan, develop and support) this part of the overall social service workforce. This approach has been used because the national context relating to the social service workforce in social protection is so different in each ASEAN member state. So the guidance can be used by ASEAN Member States as the basis to develop more specific nationally relevant guidelines and action plans that can take into account the context of each country.

Background

ASEAN Member States adopted the Ha Noi Declaration on Strengthening Social Work for Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN Community ('the Declaration') in 2020. The Declaration recognised the need for strengthening the social service workforce across sectors beyond social welfare. The accompanying Road Map for the Implementation of the Ha Noi Declaration, noted in 2021, highlighted the need for laws, policies and strategies to define and strengthen the roles and competencies of social workers and other social service workforce in key sectors, including social protection

- Priority 1.3 of the Road Map calls on ASEAN Member States to identify the role of social workers in different fields, including social protection.
- Priority 1.4 calls on ASEAN Member States to develop or strengthen relevant secondary legislation and policies for social work, minimum standards, and standard operating procedures for social workers and related workforces in different roles and settings, and to,
- Support ASEAN Member States to plan for and strengthen the social service workforce across relevant sectors and multi sectoral delivery of social work, undertake needs assessments and develop national action plans.
- Priority 1.8 tasks ASEAN with developing a regional guidance note on the role of social work and social service workforce strengthening in and for social protection systems.

This guidance is also complementary to the ASEAN Guidance on Setting Minimum Ratios for Social Workers Per Population.

The guidance also contributes to the implementation of the ASEAN Regional Framework and Action Plan to implement the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection and particularly contributes to achieving Objective c) of the Plan 'Achieve inclusion and enhance equitable access of the poor, at risk, and vulnerable groups [including but not limited to persons with disabilities, older people, youth, women, children, undernourished, victims of disasters, migrant workers] to opportunities and social protection'.¹

¹ [ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection adopted in 2013; as well as the Regional Framework and Action Plan to Implement the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection.](#)
[It is also important to note the UN ESCAP Action Plan to Strengthen Regional Cooperation on Social Protection in Asia and the Pacific \(2020\)](#)

Definitions

Social protection: The ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection, 2013, defines social protection as, ‘Interventions that consist of policies and programmes designed to reduce poverty, inequalities, and vulnerability by assisting the poor, at risk, and persons in vulnerable situations, such as persons with disabilities, older persons, youth, women, children, the undernourished, victims of disasters, migrant workers, as well as families and communities to enhance their capacities to better manage risks and enhance equal access to essential services and opportunities on a rights based/needs based approach. Definitions of migrant workers and applicability of social protection schemes shall be in accordance to the prevailing national laws, policies and regulations of ASEAN Member States’.² The Declaration also states that, ‘Social protection covers, but is not limited to, social welfare and development, social safety-nets, social insurance, social assistance and social services in ASEAN Member States’.³

The following types of policies, programmes and services are typically included under the heading of social welfare and social protection:

- social insurance (contributory pensions including for old age, disability and incapacity to work)
- social assistance (cash benefits aimed at poverty alleviation or ensuring minimum guaranteed income with or without conditionalities, subsidies for transport, food and other essentials, and non-contributory social pensions for old age, child and adult disability and veterans);
- unemployment benefits and allowances;
- maternity benefits and allowances;
- child benefits and allowances;
- disability benefits and allowances;
- labour market programs to support people into employment and improved livelihoods;
- social care services for adults (residential, home-based or delivered in centres);
- child protection services including prevention, identification and response to violence, abuse and neglect;
- alternative care services for children without parental care (in residential or alternative family settings including kinship care);
- social services for vulnerable children, youth, women (including children and women experiencing or at risk of violence), older persons and minority groups;
- social services for children and adults with disabilities; and
- community services.

Social protection systems often intersect with health, education and justice systems. Early childhood development services, such as parent training programmes, can also be found within social protection as well as within health and education. Services for children and adults in conflict with the law, for example specialised remand foster care services, may also be found in social protection as well as in justice systems.

The social service workforce comprises people who are employed or who volunteer in social welfare and social protection services and programmes, including in social service providing organisations, government departments and offices, non-governmental and private sector organisations, and in community-based organisations or networks. The workforce is made up of a range of personnel with differing mandates, functions and responsibilities and requiring different competencies.

² [ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection page 11](#)

³ ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection page 3, Principle 3.

The social service workforce is defined in the ASEAN Road Map for the Implementation of the Ha Noi Declaration on Strengthening Social Work as including a wide range of governmental and nongovernmental professionals and para professionals and community level volunteers, who work with children, youth, adult women and men, older persons, families and communities, focusing on those with additional needs who are marginalised, in vulnerable situations or at risk, to protect and ensure their healthy development and well-being and the fulfilment of their rights. To do so, the social service workforce provides preventative, responsive and promotive services that are informed by the humanities and social sciences, indigenous knowledge, 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 and social isolation, promote social justice and human rights, as well as to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect and family separation.

The wider workforce includes practitioners, researchers, managers and educators. Social service workers include social workers, case workers, community workers, case managers, among others, including those working with specific groups or on specific issues e.g. child protection and youth care workers, those specialised in addressing violence against women and children, and those working with people with disabilities, people with mental health needs, migrants and the elderly. The exact job titles and functions vary from one country to the other, in line with local laws, policies, cultures, traditions and the historical development of these roles and professions in each context.

The Social Work profession is the leading and core profession in the social service workforce. It is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion and participation, as well as the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, gender equality, cultural sensitivity, 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.

Social workers are professionals with academic training. In ASEAN Member States professional qualifications of social workers generally involve tertiary (i.e. bachelor) level education of between three and four years, or equivalent to national (professional competency-based) vocational training qualification. More than other social service workers, social workers play a central role in assessing needs then providing, coordinating, managing and reviewing the delivery of services to a specific individual or family.

Paraprofessional or para social workers - In addition to social workers, many other actors with varied competencies and qualifications, play an important role in ensuring human well-being and development, some of whom are referred to as paraprofessionals or community volunteers, owing to their auxiliary role in supporting the work of social workers and filling gaps in service provisions that, cannot be fully covered by professional qualified staff because of resource constraints.

Paraprofessional or para social workers are trained through non-degree training to perform certain social work functions, while working next to or supporting the work of a professional in the same field. They seek to meet the needs of individuals, families and groups in vulnerable situations through outreach and support at community level and are critical to delivering social services particularly in low resource settings. Paraprofessionals serve in various roles as paid staff or as volunteers.

Volunteers play an auxiliary role by filling gaps not covered by professional qualified staff or paid para professionals, most often at community level. The role of voluntary service as a stepping-stone into the workforce should be encouraged.

Social protection administrators are also part of the social service workforce and in most ASEAN Member States, they are important actors who interface with families and individuals in their homes or in social assistance offices, offering access to economic support in response to economic or other shocks or social vulnerabilities and following up on fulfilment of co-responsibilities for example as part of conditional cash transfer programmes. Although they do not always perform social work functions, they share some core competencies with other personnel in the social service workforce, such as in interpersonal communication, and an understanding and knowledge of helping and empowerment processes.

This guidance is focused on the role of social workers and the wider social service workforce in social protection, rather than on strengthening social work as a profession, which is the subject of the Road Map and other ASEAN guidance. This guidance addresses gaps in the ASEAN Declaration and Action Plan on Strengthening Social Protection which mentions workforce strengthening in three ways as follows:

- recommend minimum standards and training needs for certain professions, e.g. medical professionals, nurses, social workers;
- build capacity and capability of service providers; and
- strengthen the capacity of government officials, communities, and other stakeholders for better responsiveness, coordination and effectiveness of social protection and delivery services at regional, national and local levels.

This guidance is for ASEAN Member States that are at different stages of strengthening the social work and social service workforce and indicates how they can build on opportunities to strengthen the role of social work in social protection, and to strengthen linkages between social services and social protection, so as to build synergies in an integrated system. ASEAN Member States can use this regional guidance to develop contextualised national guidelines, action plans, regulations or adopt other strategies for strengthening the social service workforce in social protection.

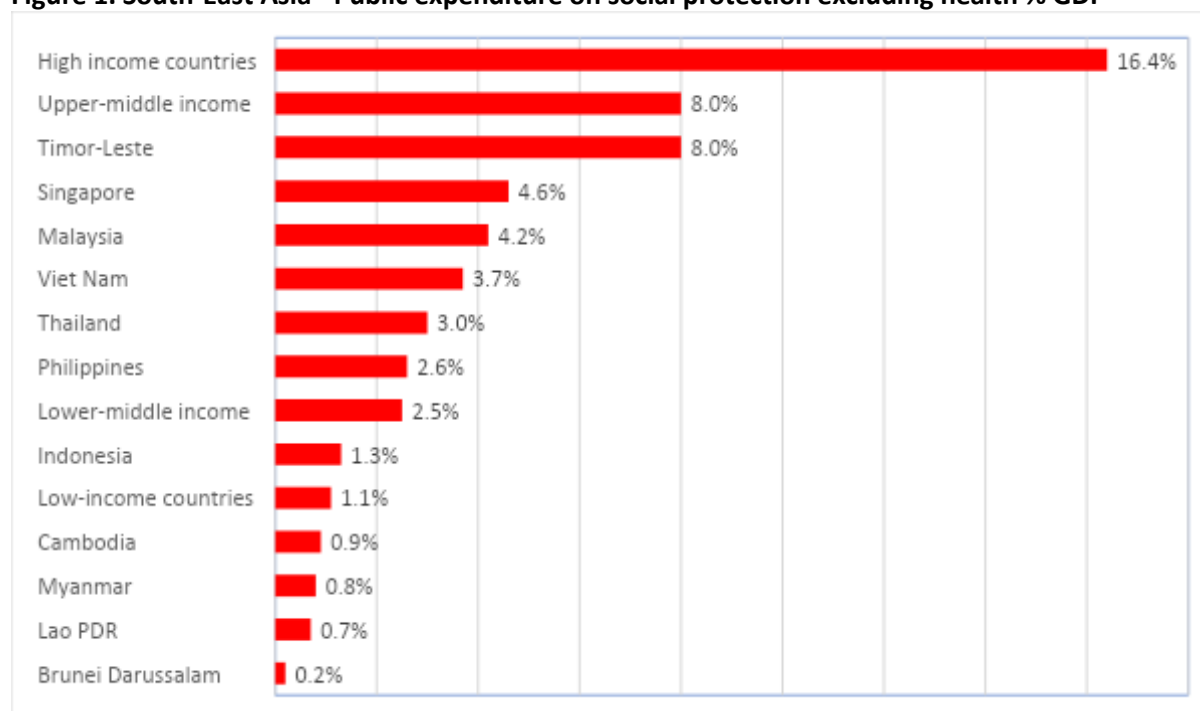
2. Overview of key issues

There is evidence that integrated social protection approaches (where cash benefits, social care services, child protection, family support, independent living services and other developmental systems such as youth work, prevention of gender-based violence and community development are all operating effectively together, both at policy level across different ministries and in practice at the local level) can multiply impact and reduce poverty, violence and social exclusion.⁴ Social workers and the wider social service workforce are critical to ensuring the implementation and coordination of these approaches across an integrated social protection system.

‘Cash plus’ services or other models of combining cash with information and training or with other systems have considerable benefits for child outcomes (cash and care, and cash + care + protection).⁵ The social service workforce including social protection administrators is essential to providing the ‘plus’ part of cash benefits programmes. This includes monitoring conditionalities, providing direct advice and counselling or assessing needs and referring children and families to other, more specialised services. The social service workforce needs to be equipped with the necessary competencies and to be adequately supported to secure these outcomes for children and families.

ASEAN Member States have different approaches to social protection as illustrated by very different levels of public expenditure on social protection (excluding health) as a percentage of GDP (figure 1).⁶

Figure 1. South-East Asia - Public expenditure on social protection excluding health % GDP



Source: Adapted from [the ILO](#) and United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). *The Protection We Want: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific*. Figure 2.3 Chapter 2. Page 17. 2021. Bangkok.

⁴ European Commission (2015). Concept Paper No. 4: Supporting Social Protection Systems.

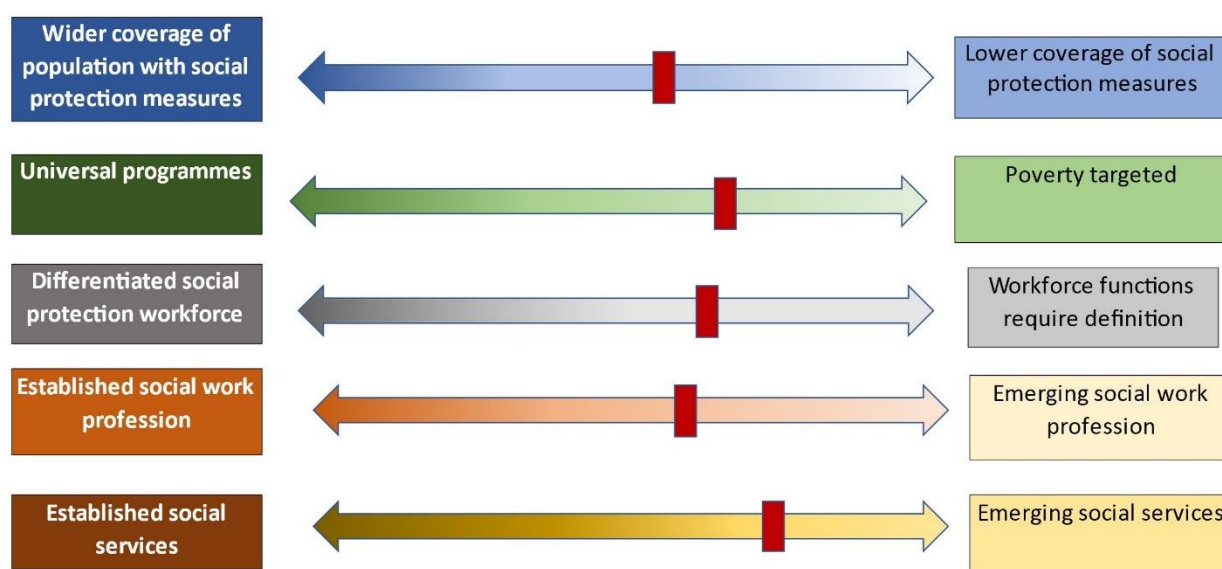
https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/supporting-social-protection-systems-20151125_en.pdf

⁵ Social Protection Inter-Agency Committee (SPIAC-B) definition cited in UNICEF (2019) UNICEF’s Global Social Protection Framework. New York.

⁶ United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). *The Protection We Want: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific*. Figure 2.3 Chapter 2. Page 17. 2021. Bangkok

All ASEAN Member States have social protection systems that include contributory social insurance schemes, mainly for government employees, veterans and other formal sector workers. Most also have social assistance programmes that are non-contributory, means-tested and aimed at reaching the poorest amongst vulnerable groups. Yet, some countries have universal or quasi-universal benefits such as child grants, old age pensions or disability allowances. The main ways in which social workers and the wider social service workforce differ across ASEAN Member States include: the extent to which social work has been recognised as a profession or not, the number and types of workers deployed across the system of social protection (including social services, child protection systems and social assistance) and the level of reliance on voluntary or paraprofessional members of the workforce such as community volunteers or community leaders. The development, composition and structure of the social service workforce including social workers in each country can be mapped onto different social protection systems including social services systems at different stages of development (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Linear representation of axes of development of social worker and wider social service workforce in line with the system of social protection including social services



Note:  represents where an example country might lie on each axis

Source: UNICEF, “The Human Face of Social Protection: Social Service Workforce in Social Protection”, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, 2023 (forthcoming)

Countries with a greater number of established and broad-ranging programmes covering a wider range of vulnerable groups, tend to have greater numbers of social workers or other social service professionals deployed within the social protection system as a whole compared to those that have a narrower range of programmes and services. In this way a typology of *emerging*, *developing* and *established* workforces can be applied to any national context and help to prioritise workforce strengthening actions.

Countries with *emerging workforces* have yet to legalise a clear definition of social work and social workers. They have relatively few professional social workers deployed in the system of social welfare and social protection and the workforce operates within social welfare and social protection systems with low expenditure on social protection as a percentage of GDP, a greater reliance on contributory social insurance programmes that do not cover the informal sector, and fewer social assistance

programs and services. Countries with *developing workforces* tend to have a legal definition of the social work profession, more clearly defined functions for different personnel, and operate within social welfare and social protection systems that have a wider range of social assistance programmes and social services meeting a wider and more complex range of needs. *Established workforces* operate in systems with a legal definition of social work and licensed and regulated social workers, and a wide range of social services for children and adults and where universal benefits have been introduced as well as targeted social assistance and social insurance programmes.

Paraprofessionals and volunteers can form a large part of the workforce at any stage of development and their functions and mandates tend to be more clearly defined in a more established workforce. Employment by state or non-government organisations is not related to the stage of workforce development. On the whole, the social service workforce in social protection tends to be large in number and performing standard tasks with large numbers of beneficiaries that require less time for interaction and fewer social work competencies than social workers who tend to be fewer in number and performing more in-depth social work tasks that last longer with a smaller number of beneficiaries in need of more complex support.

The COVID-19 pandemic and government social protection responses to the shocks of the pandemic have highlighted strengths and weaknesses in social protection systems, increased expenditure and rapidly accelerated digitalisation⁷ which all have important ramifications for the role and mandates of social workers and the wider social service workforce in social protection.

Digitalisation Social assistance payments in many ASEAN Member States are based on electronic payment systems meaning that the social protection administrators meet beneficiaries at the time of assessment for eligibility or when monitoring fulfilment of any conditions related to the cash transfer. During COVID-19 some countries introduced online application systems for additional assistance measures or implemented them automatically in the case of increased payment amounts, and this further reduces the opportunities for contact between the social protection administrators and beneficiaries. Many countries report efficiency gains from digitalisation in terms of reduced administration burden and ability to reach more people. However, there is recognition that home visits and face to face meetings are important to assess and check on the real situation of families. There is also recognition that many target beneficiaries do not have access to digital methods and traditional methods of contacting and communicating with vulnerable people continue to be used, especially in remote areas or for those who have no e-access for other reasons, including as a result of poverty or disability, age or gender divides.⁸ Other benefits of digitalisation include the opportunities provided by online teaching methods for workforce capacity building.

Lessons from COVID-19 and natural disasters on the importance of the social service workforce Many countries introduced ad hoc social protection measures and strengthened existing measures during the pandemic. The workforce, though, has not expanded in alignment with expanded expenditure with these measures being delivered mainly through existing channels, although expanded coverage also stretched the capacities of the social service workforce in some instances, especially at the local level, as they continued registering, enrolling and even doing pay-outs themselves. Well-resourced and established social protection systems have been shown to be better able to respond to unexpected shocks and protect the most vulnerable.⁹ The social service workforce played a key role in supporting access to additional COVID-19 social protection measures during the

⁷ United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). *The Protection We Want: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific*.

⁸ On the gender digital gap, see figures on p. 25 of ASEAN Gender Outlook <https://asean.org/book/asean-guidelines-on-disaster-responsive-social-protection-to-increase-resilience/>

⁹ Ibid. page v

pandemic and countries with more established social service workforces were better able to expand social protection measures during the pandemic.

The ASEAN region is one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world, which makes it important that social protection systems, including the role of the workforce, are designed also to be disaster-responsive, as well as building capacity among communities and families for disaster preparedness and resilience. ASEAN has issued Guidelines on Disaster-Responsive Social Protection to Increase Resilience, noting the importance of identifying options and the feasibility of building "surge" capacity into social welfare services, e.g. for rapid deployment of additional social workers with specialized expertise such as for GBV in the event of large scale disasters.¹⁰

Linking

The pandemic, through closure of schools and the heightened vulnerability of older persons, also revealed the critical importance of care work, which previously had often been invisible and undervalued. All societies and economies, whether rich or poor, are dependent on care workers to survive and thrive. COVID-19 brought to the fore the critical need to address this very gendered element of the economy, women generally being the main carers for children, older persons and persons with disabilities, hence the need to invest in a strong and comprehensive social protection systems that is gender-responsive, recognises the value of care work, and addresses these needs.¹¹

¹⁰ ASEAN Guidelines on Disaster-Responsive Social Protection: <https://asean.org/book/asean-guidelines-on-disaster-responsive-social-protection-to-increase-resilience/> --

¹¹ UN Women on consultation for this paper noted: ASEAN Member States can promote and adopt social protection measures that are more gender-sensitive, including through: 1) addressing gender-based violence or integration of essential services into social services and protection; 2) direct support to unpaid care work, and 3) promoting women's economic security (beyond just targeting female beneficiaries). If they do not take into account the unequal power dynamic within the household and inequitable resource distribution, cash transfer programmes by just focusing on women beneficiaries can end up creating a double burden for women and not necessarily benefiting women and children if they do not also increase opportunity for women to participate in the labour market or otherwise empower them to have great economic security.

3. Brief overview of competencies and functions of social workers and the wider social service workforce in the ASEAN Member States

3.1 Architecture and structure of the social service workforce in social protection

Social workers and the wider social service workforce in ASEAN countries are deployed across a range of ministries and at different levels of government. In most countries the national social policy ministry – also called variously social welfare, social development, human development and security, labour and social welfare, social protection - leads on designing and overseeing implementation of cash benefits, subsidies, and social services within overall social welfare and social protection programmes. A number of other ministries are also mandated to deliver different aspects of social welfare policy and programming including ministries of health, education, interior, veterans' affairs and disaster management. Ministries of finance, economy, planning and local administration may be involved in payment systems design and administration. Ministries or councils of agriculture and rural development may be involved in food security programmes that also deploy social service workforce. In some cases social workers or other social service personnel such as community workers are directly employed by health or education structures.

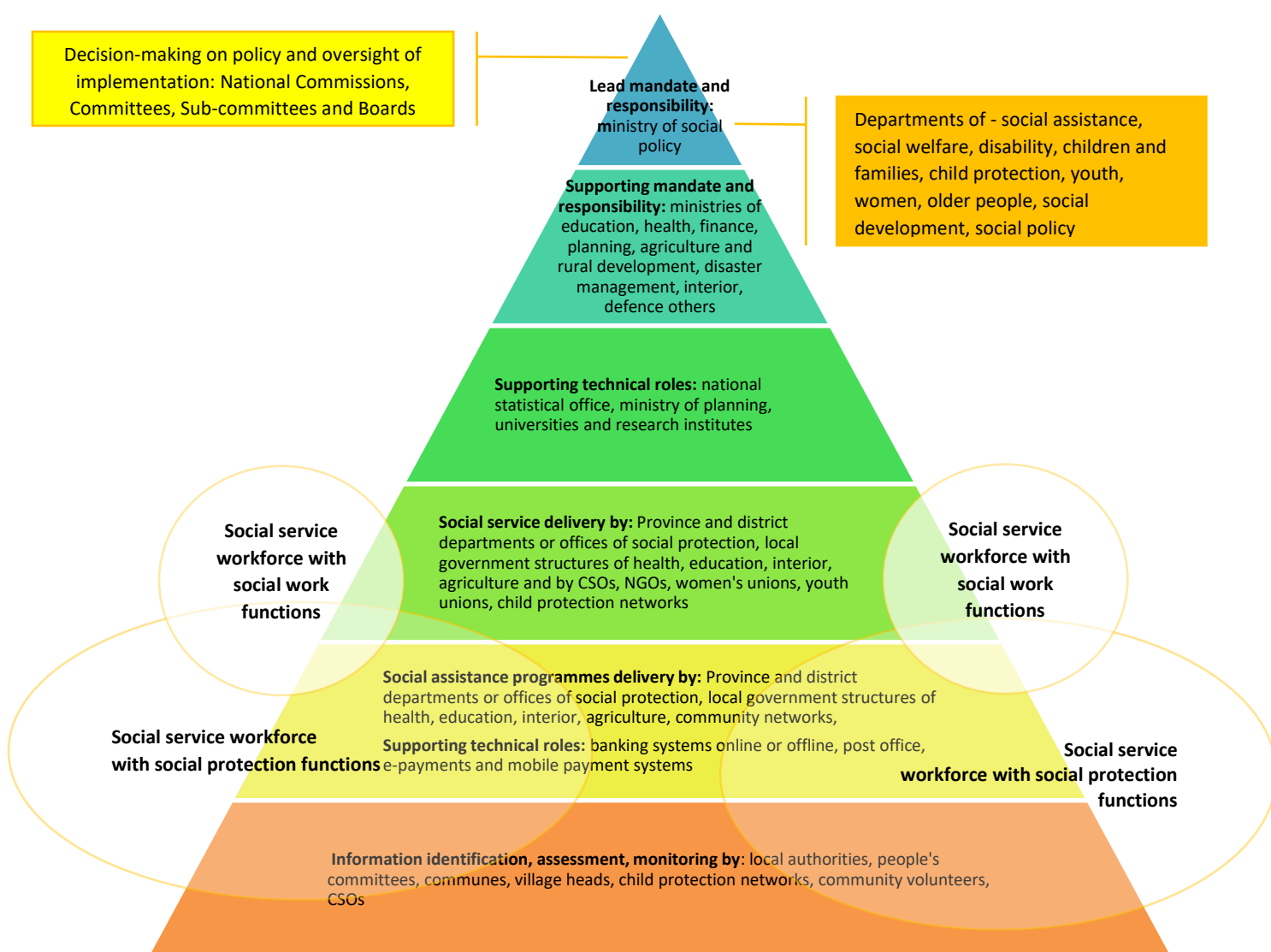
The sub-national structures of national ministries – province and district offices or departments of social welfare or social protection, local public health facilities - local administration bodies – commune committees, village heads and community members, sub-district administrations – play a key role in implementing social assistance programmes and in some cases child protection systems. Their functions include identification, referral, and eligibility assessments as well as monitoring implementation. Qualified social workers operate in some of these local structures in some countries, but in many cases the workforce is voluntary or paraprofessional, fulfilling their social protection administration or social service (including child protection) functions as a task integrated into their public administration or other community management functions. Figure 3 describes the architecture of social welfare and social protection and illustrates the size and place of social workers and the wider social service workforce based on a literature review of ASEAN member countries and four case studies. The different elements of the system can be found in any national social protection system and include:

- National Ministries and departments, national oversight commissions and technical support agencies such as national statistics offices at the top of the structure with mandates for workforce planning and strengthening;
- Sub-national offices or departments of national Ministries with mandates for implementation, decision-making on resource allocation and monitoring;
- Local level bodies, both formal local authority structures and informal community groups with mandates for identification, validation and monitoring;
- Social assistance programme delivery – cash benefits – takes place mostly at the community (primary or local authority levels) but with decision making and technical implementation managed at the district (secondary sub-national administration levels);
- Social service delivery takes place at both community and district levels depending on how services are organised. For example, district centres for social work, social support or service provision may be organised at the district level and serve populations from a number of local communities;
- The social service workforce is large and includes a wide contingent of community members and volunteers with part-time or episodic functions as well as social protection administrators. In countries with emerging social service workforces, professional social workers are often a

small part of the social service workforce. In developed and established systems, they form a larger part of the social service workforce but nevertheless are much fewer than other types of social service workforce personnel;

- There are overlaps between the functions of different personnel within the social service workforce including social workers; and
- Social workers and other social service personnel can be found among the staff, managers, technical experts and policy-makers at all levels of the system.

Figure 3. Architecture of social welfare and social protection systems and workforce in ASEAN Member States



Source: UNICEF, "The Human Face of Social Protection: Social Service Workforce in Social Protection", UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, 2023 (forthcoming)

In all cases the social policy ministry takes the lead on workforce strengthening but must have oversight of the whole workforce across all ministries, departments and levels of government, including at the community level. Even if social workers are deployed in health, education, or justice sectors, they are still part of the social service workforce. National commissions and committees with mandates for specific vulnerable groups or particular programmes are also important allies for social protection ministries in ensuring that the whole workforce is taken into consideration when planning

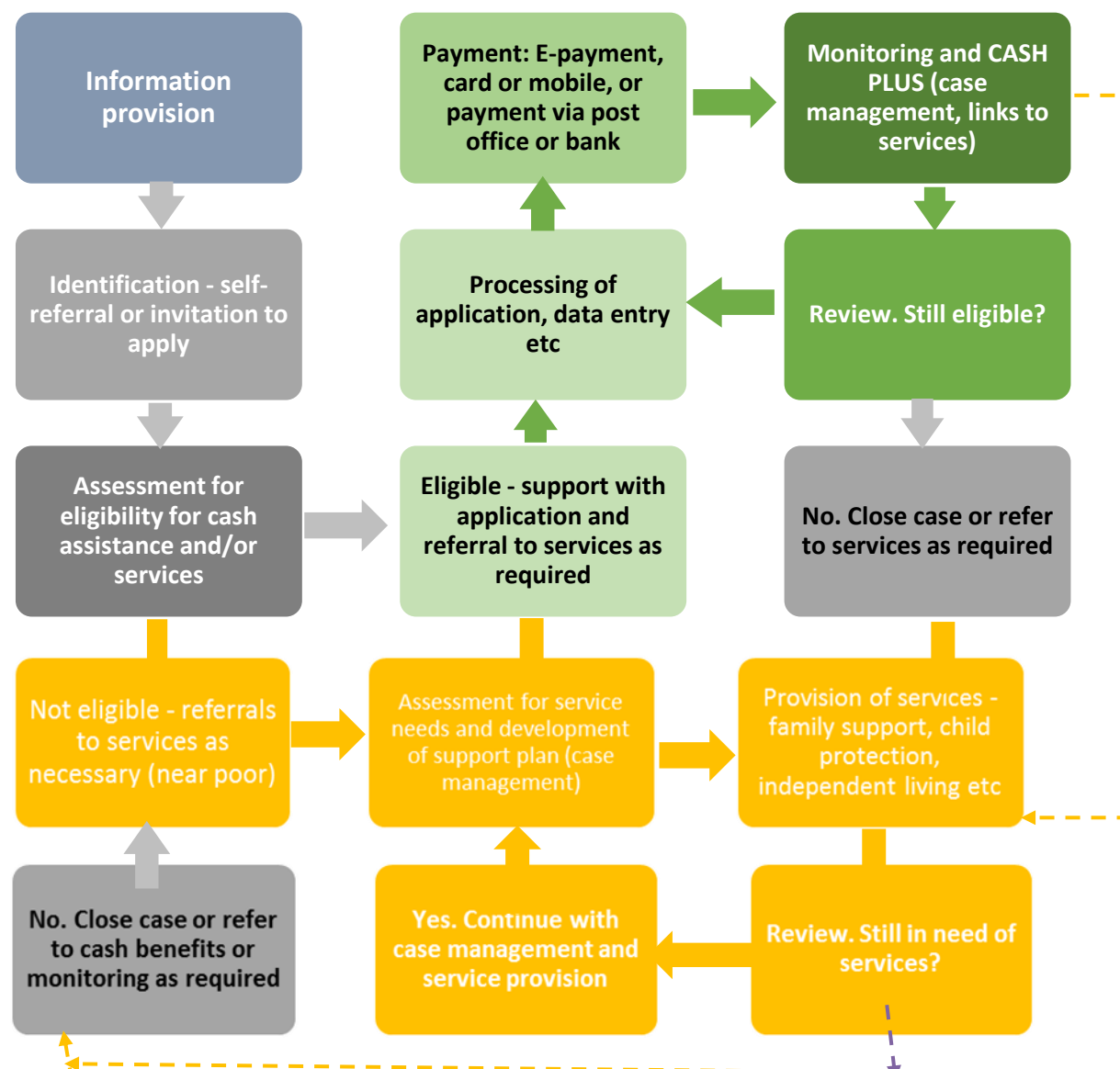
and developing strategies for investment in workforce strengthening. Strong partnerships with the Ministry of Education – or other ministries with training mandates such as the Ministry of Labour or other body responsible for vocational training – are essential for the developing the aspects of workforce strengthening that relate to social protection.

The social service workforce with social protection functions tends to include a sizable contingent of personnel that combine their social assistance or social service functions with other full-time positions as community leaders, department heads, village committee members, or commune representatives. These community leaders are deployed across all types of systems, whether emerging, developing or established. Particular consideration needs to be given to defining the functions in order to develop systematic training and capacity building, supervision and planning mechanisms, and to ensure that they are not overloaded. Highly qualified social workers may also be performing in combination too many functions and tasks within social welfare, and, to relieve this burden, social protection and social service personnel, including social protection administrators, may be able to undertake more tasks linked to social services and social work. There is a need to clearly define the tasks, functions and mandates of social workers and all members of the wider social service workforce, including those who have full-time jobs apart from their responsibilities in social protection, those who are performing standard tasks with large numbers of beneficiaries, and those who are highly qualified social workers working more in-depth with fewer service users. This will enable identification of where support is needed to ensure all members of the workforce have the competencies they need to fulfil the functions that are allocated to them and are not spending too much time on administrative work that can be done by others or on complex decision-making that can only be done by personnel with higher level competencies.

3.2 Functions of social workers and the wider social service workforce

Information provision, identification of beneficiaries or service users, intake or registration, referral, assessment, and monitoring are the main functions that are shared by the social service workforce with social work functions and the wider social service workforce with social protection functions. The algorithm in Figure 4 converts the roles, mandates and functions of the local level social welfare and social protection system from Figure 3 (where the bulk of the workforce personnel is deployed) into functions performed by the workforce at each stage of the beneficiary's journey through the system of social protection and social services.

Figure 4 Workforce functions and algorithm of an integrated social assistance and social services system



Source: UNICEF, "The Human Face of Social Protection: Social Service Workforce in Social Protection", UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, 2023 (forthcoming)

Boxes in grey denote functions related to beneficiaries who are not yet in the system of social protection or who have left the system. The green boxes denote functions related to beneficiaries who have entered the system of social assistance and are receiving cash benefits. The yellow boxes denote functions related to service provision for beneficiaries who may also be receiving cash assistance, or who may not be eligible for cash assistance but who are eligible for social services and other support (assistive devices, transport services, alternative care services for children, independent living services for people with disabilities etc). The diagram shows that people should be able to receive both services and cash benefits in an integrated system with the social service and social assistance workforce performing similar functions of identification, assessment, monitoring/case management and service provision but with different intensity and depth of engagement with the beneficiary. The diagram also illustrates how people applying for cash assistance who are not eligible (because they may not meet the criteria of the program or other reasons) can be referred to services that can support them in other ways and people who are receiving cash benefits can in parallel be referred to social services. Similarly, services can refer people to receive cash assistance if needed.

There is a need to clearly define roles and responsibilities and functions as overlaps and lack of clarity can lead to confusion and in the worst instances to inaction in critical cases such as child protection concerns. Ensuring that understanding of the social protection administrator functions and competencies can be built among social workers and the wider social service workforce, and vice versa, can help to ensure that the different parts of the social service workforce see each other as counterparts within a whole system. This also reflects the need to ensure that whole workforce planning is taking place and that there are clear career pathways for all social service workforce personnel, including social workers.

For ASEAN Member States with established workforces, a large cohort of professional social workers and many different social assistance programmes, this guidance may seem self-evident. However, ASEAN Member States with emerging and developing workforces are engaged in a process of progressive realisation of the Ha Noi Declaration and Road Map for implementation having started at very different stages of development. This guidance establishes minimum requirements for strengthening the social service workforce in social protection and offers a vision for where more established workforces can go.

- **Information provision**

Social workers and the wider social service workforce personnel have a role to play in informing potential beneficiaries of social protection programmes about available benefits and social services. This function includes community networking and social communication methods. The social service workforce uses information channels at the grassroots level that reinforce, complement, and find synergies with national and sub-national communications campaigns. One- window services can help to streamline information provision and facilitate access for potential beneficiaries, ensure transparency and prevent duplication of functions of the social service workforce.¹²

- **Identification and referral functions**

In all social welfare and social protection systems, the social service workforce plays a key role in identifying people in need of support and services and referring them to the relevant structures to take forward their application for support. In many countries the function of identifying people in need of support is performed by paraprofessionals, often people in authority at the first level of government administration – village heads, people’s committees, commune administration, district administration. These are individuals in leadership roles with responsibilities for the running of the local community and in some cases, they are also mandated to perform identification and referral functions for community child protection systems. In some countries with more established social protection systems, they are trained and supervised in performing their social protection functions. In emerging and developing systems, the approach may be less systematised.

As social protection has changed and become more digitalised, service users themselves take the first step in making applications for specific benefits or services. However, there is recognition across many ASEAN Member States and different levels of the social welfare and social protection system that some beneficiaries may not be able to make that first step because of poor internet access or their difficulty in accessing or understanding key online platforms even once found, combined with general lack of devices or low level of skill in using online platforms. In this case it is important that social workers work and the wider social service workforce can support potential applicants.

¹² See for example [single window service \(SWS\)](#) approach including in ASEAN Member States such as [Cambodia](#) or [Indonesia](#)

- **Assessment functions**

In social assistance the assessment function is commonly performed by employees of the social protection or social welfare ministry sub-national structures, or local structures of other ministries responsible for implementing cash assistance or support programs. These personnel have been trained to administer assessments to determine eligibility for cash or other benefits (school feeding programmes for example). In some social protection systems, this function is performed by volunteers or by the community leaders who have identified the household as being in need of social assistance and they may not be systematically trained in how to conduct the assessment.

In social services the assessment function is performed by social workers or other professionals – social welfare officers, disability specialists – who have training and instruments for performing complex assessments of different vulnerable individuals and households.

It can be useful to break the assessment function into smaller tasks such as initial screening or preliminary assessment that can be assigned to workforce personnel with different competencies before the professional social service personnel engage with a full proxy means test, disability assessment or other instrument.

- **Case management functions**

The case management cycle includes identification, assessment, referral, planning of interventions and monitoring implementation of individual support plans. In social services these functions are performed by social workers or case managers who have been trained in the specific needs of the target groups for these services. The social workers in established child protection services for example are typically able to assess the child and his or her family needs, and identify relevant interventions to address their needs. Multi-disciplinary teams supervised by a child protection social worker are one way of addressing shortage of trained professionals at the community level.

In social assistance programmes with conditionalities or where social assistance is combined with services such as referrals to maternal and child health, the responsible personnel from social protection ministry sub-national structures have training and guidance on how to conduct monitoring of conditionalities. In some systems, the local health facility personnel or school system have responsibilities for monitoring attendance and participation. This does not necessarily make them members of the social service workforce, but their functions, and the competencies they need to perform them, need to be considered when planning and developing the workforce.

In both social assistance and social services, case managers hold the function of ensuring that children and adults in the household are referred to specialised social services when needed and ensure monitoring of service provision. In systems where social service workforce are deployed in schools, justice systems or in health services, the case management function also includes inter-sectoral working and ensuring an integrated approach within the system of social welfare and social protection – between social assistance and social services – across different ministries and systems – child protection networks, health, education, agriculture and rural development among others.

- **Monitoring and evaluation functions**

The social workers and the wider social service workforce have critical roles to play in gathering data through case management and information management systems. The increasing digitalisation of social protection can help make these tasks less administratively burdensome. The workforce also has a role to play in facilitating feedback from service users and beneficiaries to support monitoring and

evaluation to inform planning and increase effectiveness. This is distinct from grievance and redress mechanisms which require channels that are independent from the personnel delivering the services or cash benefit programmes.

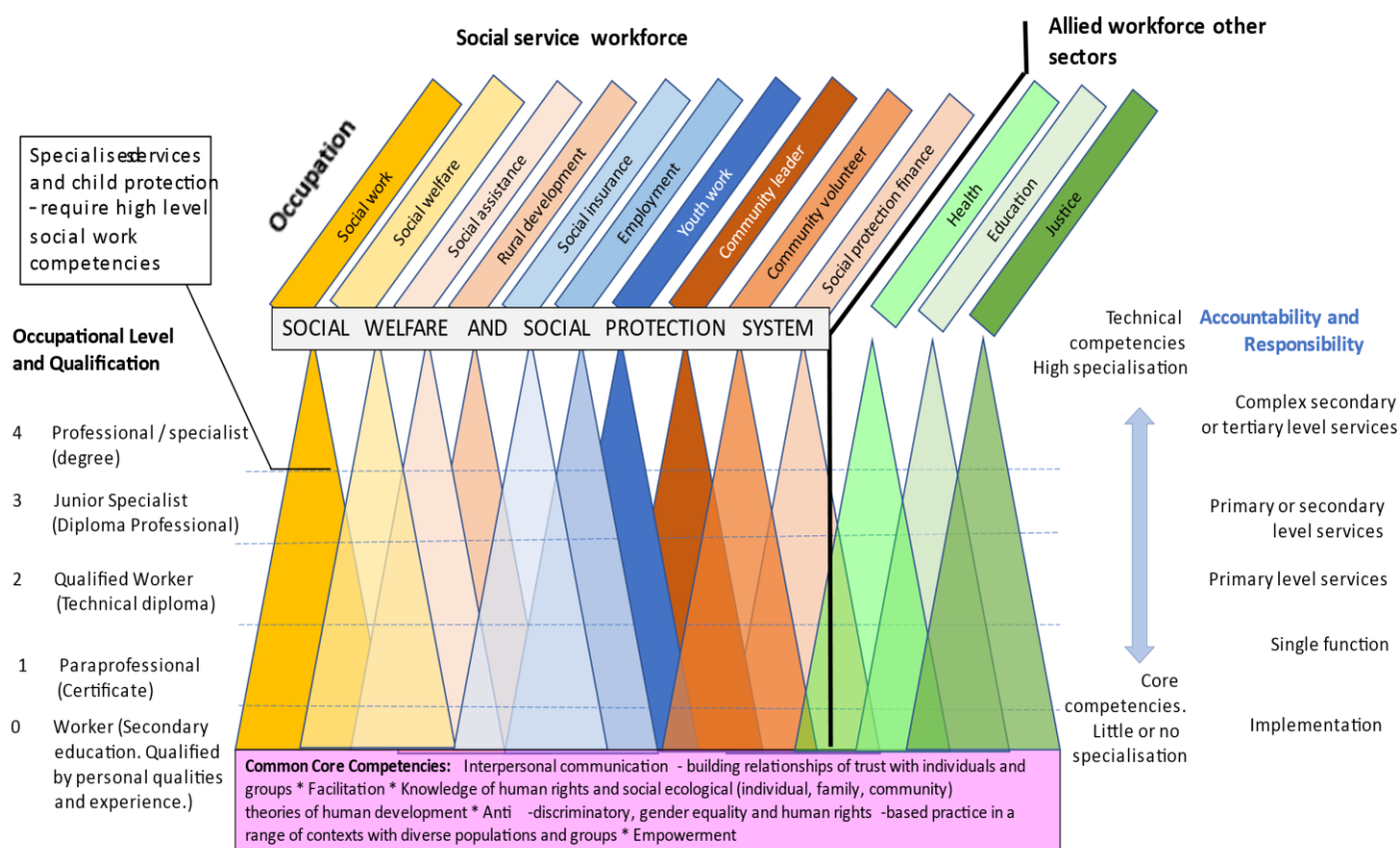
4. Towards a competency framework for the social service workforce in social protection

A properly differentiated, adequately deployed and fully capacitated workforce can enhance the impact of both cash assistance and services by ensuring coordination and synergies. The first step to developing a competency-based approach to workforce strengthening in social protection is to identify and map the functions that are being performed across the whole system. The next step is to identify the competencies that are required to perform these functions effectively. This process will enable ASEAN member state governments to identify gaps, areas where there are duplications in functions, and where people performing critical functions do not have the necessary competencies.

Child protection, for example, requires high levels of competency in assessing a child's situation and that of the family, understanding their needs and in intervening to provide effective protection and support that is in the best interests of the child. This includes competencies in working with parents and other family members, teachers, health professionals, police and other entities involved in the child's life. Only fully trained social workers have the competencies to perform child protection case work. In emerging or developing systems, where there are few professional social workers, especially at the community level, then other personnel can be trained to assist in identifying children in need of protection and referring them to competent authorities and service providers, but they cannot directly intervene and support children experiencing abuse, neglect, or violence without being fully competent in this area.

Some basic foundational competencies, set out in Figure 5, are common to many members of the social work and social service workforce, whether they are para professionals, volunteers, or professional social workers. However, as a general rule, higher levels of specialisation require higher technical competencies. In mix and match systems where it is necessary to train, for example, community volunteers or leaders to identify children in need of protection, which is a task with a high level of accountability and responsibility, they need to be trained to a high technical competency level for this particular task. However, they do not necessarily need to be trained in case management, if this is a role that will not be performed by them (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Occupations and levels of responsibility and competency in the social service and allied workforces



Source: Adapted from UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office Call to Action on Strengthening the Social Service Workforce. Geneva. 2018

Depending on the roles, tasks, functions and responsibilities being performed, key competencies for social service workforce in social protection include, but are not limited to, the following:

- **Foundational competencies:** communication and active listening skills, establishing relationships of trust, awareness of value systems and discriminatory behaviours, empowerment, active participation. These competencies should be well-developed in all social service personnel who interact with vulnerable people, regardless of whether they are part-time, volunteers, full-time professionals or civil servants;
- **Competencies in social protection:** foundational competencies, knowledge of human behaviour and development, skills in assessment and knowing when to refer for specialised services or to provide direct practical support; understanding of human development throughout the lifecycle and understanding the human rights-based approach to disability inclusion; competencies for empowering clients and service users; understanding of social protection legislation and available support and services in the local area and at the next administrative level; understanding of communications for social and behavioural change as a means of addressing dependence on cash benefits and other issues such as stigma in relation to children and adults with disabilities; understanding of financial literacy, challenges facing the near poor and a range of solutions for addressing root causes of poverty; and

- **Monitoring of conditionalities** – skills in meeting the challenge of combining targeting functions and monitoring or enforcement functions with core social work and social service workforce supportive and empowerment values;
- **Competencies in social services** and specialised areas of social welfare and social protection can include:
 - Child protection – foundational competencies, knowledge of social work core theories and competencies including, systems theory, theories of human development, child development and attachment theory, community development, strengths-based social work, trauma-informed practice, reflective practice, child protection, mental health and child protection, case management, among other skills, knowledge and behaviours; understanding disability and inclusion.
 - Youth work – same as child protection and knowledge of brain development and mental health in adolescence
 - Disability inclusion – foundational competencies, knowledge of social work core theories and competencies, knowledge of social and rights-based models of disability, disability-inclusive development, social protection and social services, independent living models, assistive devices and inclusive design (including universal design and making reasonable accommodation), alternative communication skills, case management, among other competencies.¹³
 - Active ageing and health ageing – foundational competencies, knowledge of social work core theories and competencies, knowledge of life-cycle approach to social protection and health, knowledge of age-related health conditions and impairments – dementia, Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s – and people centred, rights-based, community-based models of social care services.

4.1 Matching competencies and functions

Ideally, an integrated social protection system can deploy social workers and a range of wider social service personnel, as certain ASEAN Member States are already doing. In emerging systems there may be a much greater reliance on para professionals or community volunteers who are combining their social protection functions (mainly information provision, identification, referral and monitoring) with other full-time responsibilities as community leaders. Developing and established systems may also rely to a large extent on non-professionals as the system is still building the necessary numbers of social workers and other social service professionals for deployment throughout the country or is still building the fiscal space to expand the workforce, or simply has yet to fully define functions and competencies.

In order to maximise efficiency, there is a need to ensure that the key functions and the competencies required to perform them are clearly defined so that each individual in the system can receive the training and capacity building they need, in a systematic and continuous way, to perform their functions. Where higher level competencies are required, but there are insufficient number of social workers with the requisite competencies, potential solutions already identified in ASEAN members states include:

- Establishing multi-disciplinary teams where a qualified social worker supervises social service workforce personnel with different functions and competencies to, for example, work with children who are experiencing abuse, neglect or violence;

¹³ For more guidance on inclusive social protection, see UN (2022) ESCAP Guide on Steps to Inclusive Social Protection Systems. <https://www.unescap.org/kp/2022/steps-inclusive-social-protection-systems>

- Establishing community child protection committees and providing training in core competencies to ensure that the key functions of the committees can be performed adequately; and
- Mobilising civil society organisations and allied associations such as Women's Unions to participate as experts in child protection identification and response mechanisms.

Capitalising on some of the benefits of digitalisation that reduce the administrative burden for personnel with higher level competencies, such as online case management and benefits administration systems, can also help to ensure that functions, tasks and competencies are more efficiently matched.

5. Recommendations for strengthening the social service workforce in social protection systems in the region

In line with the ASEAN Declaration and Action Plan on Strengthening Social Protection, and the Ha Noi Declaration and Road Map, this guidance provides practical steps that can be taken by ministries of social protection and their partners in government, development agencies and non-government organisations to strengthen social workers and the wider social service workforce in social protection systems in the region. It recognises that AMS are at different stages of workforce strengthening and the guidance offers a way forward to those that have an emerging system and minimum requirements for those that have more established systems. As the workforce in the region develops and expands, the recommendations in this guidance can be revised to focus more on complex standards for more professional and differentiated workforces.

5.1 Planning

- 1. Establish a national inter-sectoral workforce strengthening commission or working group**, which also includes non-governmental stakeholders, under the ministry with responsibility for social welfare or equivalent national body with responsibilities for the social service workforce, including in social protection.

Draft and adopt a definition of the social service workforce in social protection and clear terms of reference for the scope of the group's activities in relation to social welfare and social protection, including social services, child protection and social assistance. It is recommended that the scope of the workforce plan encompasses all levels of government and all sectors and ministries where social workers and social service workforce are deployed or where decisions are taken that have impact on their functions, mandates and responsibilities, such as payment methods and service commissioning mechanisms.

- 2. Map the functions and required competencies** of the social service workforce including all personnel involved such as paraprofessionals and volunteers, social protection administrators, social workers and managers.

Identify critical functions for each step of the social welfare and social protection system algorithm set out in Figure 4 and define competencies required for each function. Ensure that consideration is given to functions of the workforce during emergencies including COVID-19, including expanding and contracting the workforce as needed to ensure adequate and effective response.

Develop a competency framework for each position in the social service workforce including paraprofessionals, volunteers, social protection administrators as well as social workers and social welfare specialists.

- 3. Calculate the number of workers, paraprofessionals or volunteers required** in social welfare and protection and allied sectors

Use social service workforce ratio guidance¹⁴, to calculate types and numbers for each set of functions in every administrative unit and level of government from the bottom up to administer and implement the full set of social assistance programmes and social services across all ministries. Take into

¹⁴ See UNICEF/GSSWA recommendations on social service workforce ratios and ASEAN regional guidance on social service workforce ratios – forthcoming 2022

consideration that guidance on ratios differs for social workers and wider social service workforce personnel with different functions and that all ratios should be adjusted to take into consideration efficiency gains from digitalisation of social welfare and social protection including case management and social assistance programme administration.

Monitor the demand for social services based on real-world statistics and research. The need for social services is influenced by a variety of factors, such as the economic situation, health condition, coverage of social services, and demographic and social structure. Therefore, it is advisable for central and local governments to continuously assess the level of need for social services in each region and sector. Longitudinal studies are helpful, in this respect, to enable identification of longer term trends and thus forecasting of future change in level and types of need.

It should be noted that currently available indicators of the number of people who need social services may not always reflect the actual situation, which includes unmet needs. In other words, the number identified as in need of a service may be lower than the actual number in need of that service, because some people might have been overlooked by the current social security system. Conversely, it should also be taken into account that in the process of developing and expanding the reach of social services, the indicators of levels of need may temporarily appear to increase, as the demand for social services increases. This happens as people who were previously missed are now identified as in need of a service.

Develop a plan for strengthening the social service workforce in social protection based on the quantitative assessment of levels of need and demand. This plan will need to include the workforce functions and competency framework needed to address identified gaps and weaknesses. It will also need to strengthen workforce planning, development and support including salary policies and policies for supporting deployment in remote areas. The plan will aim to ensure that the required number of personnel with necessary competencies can be hired, trained and deployed when and where needed, and that staff retention is maintained at acceptable levels, to prevent future workforce gaps. Planning should take into account the social service personnel deployed in different sectors and relevant sector ministries (including education, health, justice and agriculture). In the long run, flexible systems that can be responsive to future demographic and social changes should be developed.

4. Ensure clarity of roles, responsibilities, mandates and functions at all levels and for all personnel in social welfare and social protection

Develop clear job descriptions for all social workers and wider social service workforce personnel deployed in social protection and ensure that duplication of effort is eliminated, and that roles, mandates and functions are clearly defined. Ensure that volunteers and community leaders, for whom social assistance or social service functions are a small part of a wider community management mandate, have a clearly defined function and responsibility within social protection for which they can be adequately trained and supported. Consider the cost, efficiency and benefits of differentiated roles and functions with clearly delineated tasks and responsibilities. Eliminate duplication of functions and aim to achieve a streamlined system and cost efficiencies by matching functions and competencies.

Develop standard operating procedures and quality standards for administration of each type of social assistance programme or social service with clear, written guidance and accompanying training modules for each worker, paraprofessional or volunteer. Ensure clear guidance on inter-sectoral working – identification of vulnerable people and families, assessment and referral, case management and decision-making. Everyone operating within the system of social protection should clearly understand their roles, responsibilities and functions and how they connect with other sectors (such

as health, education and justice) and with different aspects of social welfare and social protection – social insurance, social assistance, labour and employment, social services, and social care.

Establish a management system, monitoring and evaluation system and information management system with clear instructions and guidance for each social worker, social protection administrator, paraprofessional, or volunteer. Use more competent and highly trained workers to supervise and guide groups of paraprofessionals and volunteers. Ensure that managerial functions and competencies are defined and clearly reflected in job descriptions, standard operating procedures, and standards. Establish a grievance and redress mechanism so that service users or cash assistance recipients can report problems independently from the social service personnel who are directly dealing with their cases. Ensure that data from the grievance and address system can inform improvements to the standard operating procedures, regulation or other aspects of the work performed by the social service workforce in social protection including social workers.

Stronger gender-responsive data and evidence to inform the design and implementation of social protection measures, are also important, and they can inform how such measures can be coordinated with services provided by the social service workforce, to ensure that they cover those that are at most risk of being left behind, particularly women and girls of marginalized and disadvantaged groups, including disabilities, and ethnic minorities, among others.

5.2 Developing

Conduct a training needs assessment of the social service workforce in social protection including social workers to identify gaps in capacity across the workforce in relation to the competency framework and to calculate the number and type of new workforce personnel required each year as graduates from the system of higher education, secondary technical education or through requalification programmes or continuous professional education. Ensure that social workers and other social service personnel deployed in other sectors (such as education, health and justice) are included in the assessment and planning for workforce development.

Establish a development funding policy for social workers and social service workforce in social protection which clearly sets out the responsibilities of the employer and the employee to pay for training and capacity building activities and, if required, a mechanism for licensing training and education service providers and for commissioning the necessary numbers and types of places for students and trainees. Ensure that social workers or other social service personnel deployed in other sectors are included in policies and programmes focused on continuous education and professional development.

Support training and education institutions to develop the capacity to provide education and training programmes in accordance with the social service workforce competency framework and workforce plan in social protection, including social workers (and those deployed in other sectors). Engage with social work teaching institutions to ensure inclusion of social protection in social work curricula including competencies relating to working with the near poor, fiscal management for people living in poverty, digital employment opportunities and other areas of knowledge indicated by latest research in ASEAN Member States and globally.

Plan and implement a long-term education and training programme for the social service workforce in social protection, including social workers, which focuses not only on strengthening government policy priorities and effective implementation of social assistance programmes and social services, but also on building competencies of the social service workforce deployed in other sectors to understand social protection and refer vulnerable people to receive support.

Establish performance management policies and systems that support the development of social service workforce in social protection and incentivise effective service provision. Ensure that all social service workforce personnel are included - paraprofessionals, community volunteers, social protection administrators, social workers, managers and all personnel defined as being in the social service workforce in social protection (and those deployed in other sectors).

Establish career progression pathways for social workers and the wider social service workforce in social protection in the medium to long term that enable progression from entry level positions, for example as community volunteers or social protection administrators, through specialisation in specific areas such as child protection, disability, social care, family strengthening, social assistance, youth work, community development, gender based violence or others and on to management, supervision and policy specialisations in social protection. Communicate and show these prospective career development opportunities to all existing and new social service workforce personnel including social workers. This will grow interest in social work as a profession as well as ensure adequate workforce in other parts of the social service workforce.

5.3 Supporting

Develop and implement policies on working conditions and remuneration for the social service workforce in social protection, including on transport and communications for outreach work in the community for all social workers, other social service professionals, paraprofessionals and volunteers. Ensure terms and conditions are clearly reflected in contracts and volunteer agreements as well as job descriptions and standard operating procedures. Ensure that remuneration and working conditions are matched to functions, roles, responsibilities and mandates.

Implement management and professional supervision policies for the social service workforce in social protection to ensure clarity on the different functions of line management and professional supervision where it is required, for example for social workers deployed in social protection to maintain professional accreditation where this has been introduced. Ensure provision of adequate management and supervision to personnel with critical social protection functions whether they are dedicated full-time to performing these functions or are combining them with other wider community leadership or volunteering functions.

Support the establishment and development of professional associations for the social service workforce. Professional associations should be responsible for improving competencies of professional social workers and the wider social service workforce, and for enabling clear career pathways. They should also promote or support a system for licensing and accreditation of social workers and any other allied professional personnel who may be deployed alongside the social service workforce, including lawyers, psychologists, therapists and many others.

5.4 Monitoring and Evaluation

Establish a monitoring and evaluation framework for the plan to strengthen the social service workforce in social protection, and reflect the monitoring progress and evaluate the results based on the implementation of the guidance, while recognising that it should encompass both social workers and other social service workforce deployed in social protection (as well as in other sectors such as education, health and justice). Identify process and outcome indicators for strengthening the social service workforce in social protection in line with the ASEAN Declaration and Action Plan on Strengthening Social Protection, the Ha Noi Declaration and Road Map.