

SOCIAL WORK CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

Introduction

The Child Protection Action Network (CPAN) is a national child protection response mechanism operating in 29 provinces. CPAN at the provincial level is led by the Department of Labour Social Affairs Martyrs and Disabled (DoLSAMD), and comprises NGOs, UN agencies, and other relevant stakeholders committed to advocating for child rights and responding to child protection issues. Evidence from CPAN identifies as a recurring challenge the paucity of trained professionals with skills sufficient to address child protection issues in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is one of the most dangerous places in the world for a child to grow up. Many children are engaged in hazardous and illegal work, excluded from education, forced into early marriage, inappropriately placed in institutional care, or trafficked for sexual exploitation and domestic servitude. The cumulative effects of war, poverty, and displacement continue to erode community coping mechanisms, and increasing numbers of children are subject to greater and greater risks. Afghanistan ranks among the lowest countries in the world for every indicator of child survival and development.

In 1994 Afghanistan ratified the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC). The CRC enshrines the rights of every child to health, safety, well being and holistic development. Ratification obligates member nations to develop legislation, policies, and practices that lead to the fulfilment of these rights. To this end, various stakeholders have evolved initiatives in child protection, education, health, and water and sanitation that aim to safeguard children and support families. However, Afghanistan does yet not have an established system of social services designed support vulnerable children and families. There is an urgent need to develop a robust and effective system for family support and child protection.

In May 2006, the Ministry of Labour Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (MoLSAMD), supported by UNICEF, launched the National Strategy for Children at-risk (NSFCAR). The NSFCAR provides a road map for building a sustainable community based child protection and family support system. It outlines a vision for the network of services, policies, and programmes necessary protect children at risk and enable them to reach their full potential free from violence, exploitation, and abuse.

Who are the most vulnerable children?

We know that certain life experiences and events can serve to protect children and enhance their life chances. These **protective factors** include having a stable and loving home life, going to school, having enough to eat, having friends to trust and play with, and feeling secure. Other factors, called **risk factors**, are detrimental to achieving the best outcomes for children.

A child's **resilience**, his or her ability to cope with difficult situations, is generally determined by the balance of protective factors and risk factors. Greater numbers of risk factors are associated with greater vulnerability.

Many children in Afghanistan are vulnerable to a host of child protection threats. Those at greatest risk include children living in extreme poverty, children separated from their parents or caregivers, children living or working on the street, children exploited for commercial or sexual means, children of female headed households, and girls forced into early marriage.

Professional social workers are critical to the effective delivery of family support and child protection services in Afghanistan.

One of the key tenets of the NSFCAR is the development of staff trained as child protection social workers. In countries with established social service delivery systems, social workers are identified as professionals who work in direct support of vulnerable groups. Child protection social work is the specific branch of social work focused on supporting vulnerable children.

"Professionalization" of social workers - a key to manage quality of care for children

Child protection social work is defined by a set of skills and competencies that certify each social worker's ability to work with vulnerable children. In most countries, to qualify as a social worker requires completion of a university degree and registration with a professional organization for licensing or accreditation. In addition, social workers are bound by legal and ethical guidelines that govern the scope of their professional activities. These guidelines ensure that social work is always conducted in the best interests of children, and that decisions and interventions are always aimed at promoting the optimum life chances of the child.

Although the title of 'social worker' is often used for staff working with vulnerable groups in Afghanistan, there is significant disparity in the quality and the types of roles, responsibilities and activities they conduct. Social work does not yet exist as a 'profession' in Afghanistan. There is no school of social work or other accredited training programme. There are no standardized tools, quality benchmarks for service delivery, or established minimum standards of care. Relevant legislation and policy is outdated at best, absent otherwise.

This lack of trained, professional child protection social workers puts vulnerable children at even greater risk. Ineffective social work fails to protect children from existing threats; inappropriate social work interventions exacerbate protection violations.

UNICEF has played a key role in initiating the development of professional social work training and practice.

In order to develop basic social work capacity and support vulnerable children and families in Afghanistan, UNICEF and MoLSAMD co-organized a social work training programme that targeted government staff and partner NGOs involved in child protection work. This programme delivered a 6-week training programme to a core group of Master Trainers, who in turn facilitated a series of 7-day training programmes for nearly 500 Community Support Workers in Kabul and at Provincial level in 2004.

Regular supervision and follow-up system has to be in place to ensure learned skills and knowledge are being applied in various child protection service

Despite the success and scale of this effort, there remained a pressing need for follow-up training activities and a more practical, field-oriented supervision system for junior practitioners. In response UNICEF initiated a social work coaching project, in collaboration with provincial CPAN and four NGOs (Children in Crisis, Child Fund Afghanistan, Save the Children UK and War Child) in 2007.

This project aimed to build capacity in basic social work skills, particularly for staff working with especially vulnerable groups, such as children in institutional care and children in conflict with the law.

Participants in the social work coaching project included approximately 240 practitioners already working directly with children, representing 8 provinces in 5 pilot regions. Trainees were provided with intensive on-the-job mentoring from the child protection partner agencies. A second phase of the coaching project has recently begun to consolidate and build on learning and skills development.

Lessons and challenges

No common framework to define the role of the social worker in child protection service

1. **A formal social work training programme will help clarify the role of social work in child protection services.** There is significant variation in the capacities and functions of staff currently working with children. Without established regulatory mechanisms, national occupational standards, and best practice guidelines, there is no common framework to define the role of the social worker in child protection service. This has resulted in widespread confusion among staff regarding their professional responsibilities, and is reflected in a lack of standardised policies and practices focusing on best interests and positive outcomes.
2. **Staff selected for social work training must possess basic competencies necessary to undertake formalized training activities.** In some regions, orphanage workers selected to participate in social work training lacked the fundamental skills, attitudes, and insight required to successfully complete training activities. Selection must ensure that staff working directly with children, are committed to preparation and attendance, and are able to read and write. A critical factor in meeting the requirements of training and mentoring is the capacity to understand and assimilate the knowledge and skills conveyed through training activities. A number of the key tasks identified as fundamental competencies for social workers, including assessment, case conferencing, identifying appropriate resources, and care planning, demand complex abilities in critical thinking, self evaluation, evidence-based decision making, and sound judgement that reflects the best interests of the child.

Fundamental competencies for social workers, such as assessment, case conferencing, and care planning have to be understood and internalized

What do we mean by children's well-being?

Basic care: providing for the child's physical needs, and appropriate medical care.

Ensuring safety: ensuring that the child is adequately protected from harm and danger.

Emotional warmth: ensuring that the child's emotional needs are met, giving the child a sense of being specially valued and a positive sense of their own cultural identity.

Stimulation: promoting a child's learning and intellectual development through encouragement and cognitive stimulation and promoting social opportunities.

Guidance and boundaries: enabling the child to regulate their own emotions and behaviour.

Stability: providing a sufficiently stable family environment to enable the child to develop and maintain a secure attachment to their primary caregiver (usually parent or extended family member) in order to ensure optimal development.

Orphanages are 'used' for various purposes by families with different needs - lack of differentiation between children in need of protection services and those with viable family support systems coming for other services available in the orphanage

Establishing a clear demarcation is critical in occupational roles, standards, and training strategies of social workers and care workers (i.e. para-social workers)

The prolonged absence of social work as a profession in Afghanistan has major consequences for the establishment of a professional workforce

3. **Formalized social work will help support existing child care institutions to better identify and meet the needs of vulnerable children.** In the absence of regulation, individual child care institutions across Afghanistan have independently evolved an extensive diversity of functions and services. For example, while all children in Kabul orphanages receive full-time residential care, a large majority of children attending orphanages in Kunduz and Baghlan are used to access daytime services, such as education, healthcare, and meal support. At the government orphanage in Badakhshan, recent research shows that almost all children attend as a means to access local schools. The lack of coherent records, case files, or consistent day registers, makes it nearly impossible to follow the cases of individual children. It is difficult to differentiate between children in need of dedicated child protection services and those with viable family support systems attending for other services.
4. **An effective system for family support and child protection depends on distinct roles for social workers and care workers.** Social work training programmes in Afghanistan do not differentiate the roles of social workers and care workers, and attempt to train all staff in the same skills and competencies. Although social workers and care workers both work directly with children and share an important set of skills and knowledge, there are several key differences. Social workers are responsible for making key decisions in assessment and care planning. Care workers are responsible for the implementation of specific care plan objectives and activities, and for ensuring that a child's basic needs are met on a day-to-day basis. Evidence from local evaluations and field experience, as well as comparison with models of service delivery from international child protection and welfare services, strongly suggests that effective training programmes should provide clear demarcation in occupational roles, standards, and training strategies.

The establishment of a skilled, professional, and accountable child protection workforce begins with the creation of the first nationally accredited social work qualification in Afghanistan.

This will be accomplished by the development of a formal and sustainable system for social work training, skills development, and registration in line with NSFCAR objectives. In addition, a separate curriculum and training, adopting the same framework and delivery system as the one for social workers, will be developed specifically for the role of care workers.

The prolonged absence of social work as a profession in Afghanistan has major consequences for the establishment of a professional workforce. Curriculum design will take into account the possible restraints and limitations of the implementing environment, including the number of experienced and qualified trainers and the existing knowledge and capacity of programme participants. At the same time, the establishment of a professional workforce is contingent on the development of appropriate legislative frameworks, policies, minimum standards of practice, standardized tools, and referral pathways.

ANQF guides the process of developing occupational standards and training programmes to achieve them: the starting point for developing a syllabus and curriculum has been to examine the minimum competencies necessary to perform the role of social work and care with children

Although most countries with established social services use a university degree as a prerequisite to professional social work, in Afghanistan this requirement would inappropriately out-step access to higher education. Rather, in line with the proposed the **Afghanistan National Qualifications Framework (ANQF)**, the starting point for developing a syllabus and curriculum has been to examine the minimum competencies necessary to perform the role of social work and care with children. Competency based qualifications are designed to assess the skills and knowledge an individual can apply in a work scenario. These qualifications are based on national occupational standards that describe the level and breadth of performance that is expected of individuals whose work involves Social Work and Child Protection.

Curriculum modules will be designed to support the development of practical skills and knowledge for adults working with children and families. The modules will focus in particular on working with especially vulnerable groups, including children living in institutional care and children in conflict with the law. The modules will build on each other to provide a consolidated skill set that will enable participants to complete the stages of effective social work from assessment to permanency planning.

Partnerships for the development of competency based training

In April 2008, Ministries of Labour Social Affairs Martyrs and Disabled, Education, Higher Education, and Finance signed a Memorandum of Understanding stating their commitment to the improvement and restructuring of educational and training sectors in Afghanistan. These ministries have established the Committee on Education and Skills Policy (CESP) whose key aims are the development of: (1) the Afghanistan National Qualifications Authority (ANQA), (2) the Afghanistan National Qualifications Framework (ANQF), and (3) the constitution of the awarding boards for implementing education and training policy and reform as embodied in the Education Sector Strategy of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS)

The National Skills and Development Programmeme (NSDP) within MoLSAMD, in conjunction with the World Bank's Afghanistan Skills Development Project (ASDP), has developed a competency levels-based ANQF that is proposed to encompass all education and training. This project will develop the ANQA and ANQF that will standardize training methodologies and accredit qualifications to internationally linked levels of achievement.

UNICEF has engaged in preliminary discussion with NSDP and determined that social work can be incorporated into NSDP's competency skills scheme. Along with specialized inputs from experienced social work practitioners, NSDP can assist in ensuring that ranges of social work training courses can be categorized at competency levels that fit the forthcoming ANQF. Once the competency levels are determined, they can be linked to certification programmes that will become an important part of the regulatory mechanism for child protection staff and services.

On completion of the training, social workers will be competent in the following areas:

- Understanding child development
- Understanding the processes of assessment and care planning
- Carrying out direct work with children and families, including communicating effectively with children
- Gathering, evaluating, selecting and analysing evidence for decisions in assessment and care planning
- Employing objectivity
- Assessing and reassessing information
- Promoting the need for different services to meet different needs
- Outlining decisions in a child's best interests, with supporting evidence

Key steps in the Social Work process

Prepare need assessment

Prepare for and work with children, families, carers, and communities to assess their strengths, needs, and circumstances

Plan, intervene, review, and evaluate practice

Develop appropriate care plans, carry out, review, and evaluate social work practice with children, their families, carers, communities, and other professionals and agencies

Support representation and advocacy

Support children and families to represent their needs, views, and circumstances

Assess and manage risk

Manage risk and protect children, families, carers, communities, and self

Manage and be accountable

Manage and be accountable (with supervision and support) for your own social work practice within your agency

Develop professional knowledge, values and competencies

Demonstrate professional competence in social work practice

Afghanistan faces a crucial need to develop an institutionalised service delivery system to support vulnerable children and families, to meet objectives set in the NSFCAR, and to fulfil obligations under the CRC.

The realization of an effective system is a long and involved process, demanding commitment from all key stakeholders at the level of community, government, NGOs, and UN agencies. Recent achievements including the evolution of CPAN, reforms to the Juvenile Justice system, increasing capacity among participants in the social work coaching project, and growing awareness around child protection issues indicate a shift towards that commitment. Future success depends critically on the development of a comprehensive Child Act, minimum standards of care for children in institutions, national occupational standards for social work, and a cadre of trained and competent social workers and care workers with the skills necessary to address child protection issues.

This project will develop a competency based curriculum, incorporating lessons learned from previous coaching initiatives, to facilitate the training of a professional and accountable workforce for delivering child protection and family support services.

This will be accomplished through the development of a formal and sustainable system for social work training, skills development, and registration. The outcome will be an inaugural qualification in Social Work and Child Protection for Afghanistan, designed to serve as a platform for the development of further initiatives to support capacity development under the proposed ANQF.

