

Executive summary - UPU Guide to Postal Social Services

The global postal system is strategically well placed to tackle many of society's greatest challenges, yet Posts are still underutilized as a social development partner. The evidence summarized in this guide reveals the wide variety of social services that Posts currently offer and outlines the case for further diversification, innovation, investment and partnership.

Posts are already fighting poverty and inequality, leveraging their vast physical distribution network and commitments to a universal service to help people meet their basic needs. Through historic connections to government and regular interactions with customers, Posts have also established a unique position of trust within many communities. This reputation provides the foundation for offering more sensitive services, such as managing personal health data, or checking on vulnerable people in their home.

Government and corporate commitments to sustainability give Posts a clear mandate to support social development, while opportunities for increasing revenue and customer satisfaction help to build a strong business case. Many Posts are therefore transforming into broad social service providers, acting as an essential partner for governments, NGOs and multilateral agencies seeking ways to achieve their social development goals.

What are postal social services and why are they important?

This guide defines postal social services as services that are explicitly designed to convey direct benefits to society, and that are implemented regularly and reliably and broadly accessible. Key sustainable development challenges for the next 20 years include reducing poverty and inequality, meeting the needs of an ageing population, supporting an increasingly mobile society, and recovering from the broad impacts of COVID-19. The Post can offer solutions, helping people to meet their needs in areas such as health, education, community connection, access to government services, utilities and technology. Many Posts already have the capacity and ambition to provide these solutions: 79% of Posts (89 out of 113 responding to our survey) currently offer some type of social service, and 59% intend to offer new services in the future.

Opportunities and actions for designated operators

For Posts to successfully diversify into offering social services, it is important to recognize that every Post, and the community it serves, is unique. In addition, some services are relatively simple to implement, while others will require high levels of investment and commitment. The examples and recommendations in this guide are therefore not presented as fixed templates or prescriptions, but rather aim to support Posts in developing social services that fit their local context, and that can be sustained over time. Key conclusions are summarized below:

- **Recognize multiple benefits.** Social services can generate revenue for the Post, deliver social impact, and create value for development actors. These benefits should be explicitly stated as strategic objectives within the business case, communicated to stakeholders, and paired with appropriate performance indicators.
- **Partner with social development actors.** Posts should actively engage with government ministries, NGOs, multilateral agencies and the private sector to better understand their needs, and to encourage the use of postal infrastructure for achieving their social development goals. This guide provides numerous examples of public/private partnerships,

which bring additional perspectives and knowledge, helping to reduce risks and access new funding streams.

- **Review existing capacity.** Posts should explore how their existing infrastructure, products, services, expertise and partnerships could be leveraged to offer new social services, while identifying strategically important gaps in capacity.
- **Legitimize and promote postal social services.** Expanding the traditional range of postal services may require significant internal and external communication efforts, to ensure strong customer awareness, and to embed the principle that the Post is a legitimate social service provider. This can include using the term community services instead of non-postal services, and marketing bundles of services to particular segments of society, under headings such as services for families or senior services.
- **Leverage digital technology.** Posts are well placed to help people connect to the Internet, to offer hybrid physical-digital services, and to create new social services that are entirely digital. Postal strategies for digital transformation should therefore explicitly consider ways to support social services.
- **Retain and build trust in the Post.** The reputation of the Post as a trusted intermediary for private information is a valuable asset, helping to establish new social services that involve managing sensitive information, distributing social payments, or working with vulnerable people. However, trust in the Post should not be taken for granted and is not universal; it is important that Posts' core delivery capabilities are sound and secure before any expansion into social services. As Posts diversify, it is inevitable that new risks will need to be managed. These include, but are not limited to, risks to the public, postal staff, partners, revenue, reputation, social impact, legal liability, and the viability of the service itself. Investing in the security of personal data is particularly important for reducing risks, and for building trust in social services.
- **Co-create new services with postal workers.** Social services are inherently personal and often involve face-to-face interactions with the public. Their success is intimately linked to the safety, motivation, training and goodwill of mail carriers and post office staff. Proposals for new social services should therefore be developed and reviewed in consultation with postal workers and their representatives, to ensure buy-in and commitment to service provision.
- **Remain relevant to the public and future-focused.** A customer-centred approach is essential to the success of social services; priority should be given to understanding the needs of local communities and key user groups. Posts should promote a culture of adapting services to the changing needs of society, while embracing new technology, innovation and experimentation.

Opportunities for social development actors

The postal system is a resource that should be used in creative ways by governments, NGOs and multilateral agencies. Posts offer extensive social, physical and digital infrastructures that operate as entry points for the public to access social services. This strategic social role of the Post should be recognized by development actors when preparing investment plans for public health, well-being and community development, yet this is not always the case. The COVID-19 pandemic has, nevertheless, improved awareness of how the Post can function as an essential social service provider and partner. This guide has identified the following opportunities for social development actors to make greater use of the Post to improve people's quality of life.

- **Use the Post to increase efficiency.** There is a clear synergy between the needs of social development actors to connect with the poorest and most isolated in society, and the commitment of Posts to serve the entire population. The Post offers an efficient system for managing welfare payments, delivering social and humanitarian aid, and communicating public health and safety messages. Outsourcing these tasks to the Post can help charities or government ministries to focus on their core areas of expertise. In addition, renting space within post offices may be more cost-effective than operating stand-alone facilities, helping to bring services closer to the end users.
- **Invest in the Post to achieve your social development goals.** Governments, NGOs and multilateral agencies should consider making strategic investments in postal infrastructure, as a means for achieving their development goals (e.g. universal access to vaccinations). Governments could also fund designated operators to develop innovation programmes that focus on key social policy objectives.
- **Include the Post within your strategies, policies and frameworks.** The Post can be strategically important to the success of diverse initiatives, from generating national statistics on well-being, to establishing comprehensive recycling systems. Social development actors should explicitly acknowledge the value of the Post to these initiatives, identify specific roles for the Post, and seek to support synergies between these different roles.
- **Share and collect more data.** Postal networks are ideally structured for increasing people's access to reliable information. Community hubs and digital kiosks can be located within post offices, while advice materials can be delivered directly to people's homes. Conversely, these networks can be used for collecting data to better understand people's needs (e.g. through household surveys), and for monitoring pollutants and weather extremes that are relevant to public health and safety.