

International 1: Santa

Hi and welcome to Social Work Spotlight, where I showcase different areas of the profession each episode, with a 12-month focus on social workers around the world as of August 2025. I'm your host, Yasmine Loupis, and today's guest is Santa, an early career social worker from Laos with paid and volunteer experience for the Red Cross, and the UN, as well as working with migrants to support them to build their skills and experience to gain meaningful employment. Santa has a passion for human rights, humanitarian aid, social protection and research.

Yasmine Thank you so much, Santa, for joining me on the podcast today. I'm looking forward to talking to you about your experience so far. Can you tell me firstly, when you started in social work and what brought you to the profession? What got you interested in it?

Santa Actually, the beginning of the story starts from when I worked as a volunteer with Red Cross in 2014. At that time I helped the Red Cross on the blood donation campaign, and we giving the counselling for the donor to come and donate the blood on that time. So I promote the Red Cross. After that, I jumped a little bit deeply to the opportunity with Red Cross that gave me the peer educator. We do a training for the school. Most of the training we train, is like school safety, just as the management. And we do counselling for the student who come and asking about if this risk happen, what can I do and what is a mechanism, something in a school that I can use to solve this problem. So kind of like being volunteer on that time lead me to have kind of like this passion to become something that I don't know on that time, what job I will be work in the future or what kind of things I would dream about. But when I graduated high school, actually I applied two major. I wanted to become a doctor, and second one is I applied, I want to become a social worker. Yeah, and I got social work in 2018 at National University of Laos. This is a new picture for me, new perspective. The first year is like you study a theory, you jump deeply to understanding the human problem, human history, and you learn about psychology, how to deal with people, how to give the right advice when you found something difficult during your services for other people. The first year is okay. The second year is quite a harder bit because I kind of like move out from the comfort zone, have to work with the real workplace. So I work with the disability center in Laos. So we providing the activity that develop their physical and mentally. I work as a volunteer there for six months. On the second year, giving me the other way now, like what kind of social work I should be in the future. Generally, I learned only about, okay, this is what social work's like, and we learn about ethics, we learn about rule, we learn about principle. That second year is like opened my eyes a lot on what kind of social work I want to be. And on the third year, we do the practice. So the professor just sent us to the workplace. Yeah, it brings more opportunities at that time, because I can narrow down what kind of job I want to achieve at that time. So I start work as an intern with STELLA. It's a social enterprise company. They provide a job and education counseling. So I was one there, work as the data person. And after data persons, I provide services for the student in the high school and the graduate student from university who want to find the place of work to do. And after that, my last year in 2022, actually the COVID come. Yeah, it's like your dream's gone already. I'm not sure how to say it, on that time it was like very dark, cannot see anything. But fortunately, the previous intern place I do, they offer me a job. So I get a job on my fourth year as the project coordinator. So actually, we train migrant worker and the student in the southern part on job training, we're providing the small grant for them to do business. And during that time, I see the community level is quite opportunity a lot. They might not access to the health services, they might not access to the common things like the city people live. So after that end of contract, I

start work as the consultant with the UNFPA to support the sexual and reproductive health services to the youth in Vientiane and also providing the family planning services for them. Actually, most of my work is doing data. So kind of like I have to track the client a lot. Mostly I have to monitor them after they use the services. I would say, support the counselling center. So this is really challenging job, but in the same time, I understand the data is very relevant a lot. UNFPA give me many opportunity. I also open to the new knowledge on the supply chain management, why it's really important, why some of the services need the equipment, need the food, need the tools. This is also the things that I learned and I got the experience from the UNFPA. As the consultant on that time, I built the data tracking system for them as the main task I was hired to do, and I built the M&E system for them too. It's quite short-term contract and I have to move forward for another place again. So I go back to work with the Red Cross. On that time, they opened the job opportunity for me to support the province office. So I was hired as a project management assistant to help the health services and the hospital in Luang Prabang to provide primary healthcare. On my part, I support all the staff. We have midwife, we have social work, we have engineering, we have engineer person too, and we have the community health, volunteer community health service persons. I would say the first respondent, if you might hear in the community level. My main task is deliver the work to them, coordinate with the government sector. We do a change about the challenge thing we have and ways to further plan solutions. At the time is quite, the job is quite multiple, my role, not only thinking about the services we have to give, but internally for our staff itself, we have to manage it as much as we can to ensure that they have the good preparations, good ability to give the work to the community. I worked there for a year, and my last task when I worked in Lao Red Cross last year, was I helped the World Food Program to deliver the rice. I would say the emergency food respondent to the people in the southern part of Lao. And during that time, it's the lean season, so they cannot grow anything. It's quite near to flood season, I would say. And it's flood on that time, too. I worked in a field, and unpredictable situations also happened. We were cut out from the team, and cars broke down in the middle of our mission there. Yeah, this is also the things I have experience working with the Red Cross.

Yasmine It's a lot. There's so much in that, and that really only covers the very first part of going through university and trying to figure out what is social work in the first place, right? But it sounds as though you do four years full-time before you then graduate and can start working and getting paid for it, rather than just the internships, right?

Santa Yeah. So actually in social work in Laos, we study four years. Our professor will send us to do an intern and volunteer on the second year. So we do two times second year, two times third year, and the last internship will be also the third year. So I would say five. But actually, professor not gonna give us much lecturing, not like that. They will send us to do a job, do internship, like to get the credit for the university, but in the same practice.

Yasmine That's great.

Santa This is the things that I will say, like, if you want to be a good social worker, you need to practice, but practice without recording, that's meaningless. That's why I do data. I want to support the student. I will say the junior person to understand like, okay, if you do something in the past, this is a lesson that you have. So you have to keep it as a case study. It's not about, you know, okay, so every day, forgot, no. You kind of like have this, I would say, mental working. It's like you have to have this systematic thinking in yourself when you're giving the people the services. I think this is also a really important part.

Yasmine Yeah. And I think everything that you've done as part of both, you had some frontline and then you had some backend policy program things, really helped you develop an understanding of how the service needs are determined, in order to guide funding. So you can kind of see the forward bit, the backward bit, and you'd have to have a really good understanding how the different pieces of the puzzle work together in order to help with those referral points and make sure things are working in a coordinated way, yeah?

Santa Yeah. As the graduate social work person, I would say that social work in Laos quite not that diverse, but what I promote and what I keep myself to support the social work in Laos, I think in the future it will be more important for our society. As I see today, we kind of like jump to the globalisation, and many things come a lot, come to our country a lot. So for the new generation, I think it's very important that we have this job continuing in our society. But hopefully there will be more specific social worker. Yeah. That's generally, I would say, because we graduate and then we, some of our students miserable. So they don't know what type of work they want to do. And in the same time, our country is quite small. And I think in the future if it come bigger, myself as a case study record person can support the other generations to develop this social work in Laos.

Yasmine Yeah. It sounds as though, you mentioned that the southern part is bit more disadvantaged or a lot more migration, a lot more movement. Is that the case? Is that why some of those services were centered in that area?

Santa Yeah, you know, on that time it was COVID, and they come back from the nearby country like Thailand. They're jobless. I would say myself, I haven't start working since I ended contract with Red Cross now, regarding to the funding we have. And I feel them because compared to me, like I still have food to eat in the morning and I still don't have that much value for them to not have a job, not have earning, and then they have come back to their house and they just stay there not doing anything and their money that they have for their saving is gone day by day. And that's why I made that decision to work with that, I would say thematic issue on that time, is migrations. So that's what I see, that you're just giving people hope, you know, like giving people a choice. I think that's, that's the core part, like, is you can change them a lot. One of our participants who, why I was, I trained them, they come today, they are also my best friend. Also, we have a good connection with them. The skill we train, they can apply for other job. They work in a farm at that time, and now they start as the staff of the bank company and some of the private company. Yeah. Yeah, for me, the answer on that time as a social worker is like, you're giving people a choice to cross that problem, to have a solution. Like, you kind of like guide them, too. And I automatically become their personal advisor person.

Yasmine Yeah, like a coach or mentor.

Santa So sometimes they have a family issue, some like that problem issue. They come and ask me about, how should I feel? What should I do to cross this problem? So it's like the skill from the university is answering me a lot, because I can provide them the right choice. But not 100%, but it's a choice to guide them to help themselves. Yeah.

Yasmine Of course. And I think the fact that you've had experience in so many different agencies just as part of the study. In Australia, just to give you an idea, we have two placements usually only, and they're long placements. So some universities might break it up and do three placements, but usually it's two long placements, and it's altogether a thousand hours. So we do the four years, same as you, but the first two years are just theory, and then the third and the fourth year are long placements. So I would imagine in Laos people graduating would have

more experience over a larger amount of things or areas of practice. So you can, if someone comes to you and asks for advice for something, you might not have all the answers, but you've probably heard from someone who's worked there, or if you've worked in one of these agencies, you can at least help to guide them in the right way. Whereas if someone came to me and asked for something very specific in an area that I hadn't done a placement in or haven't worked in, I'm probably not going to know the answer. So I think it's really good that they give you a really strong foundation before you even leave university.

Santa Yeah. That's, that's was the journey until today.

Yasmine And you said you're studying as well, now?

Santa Before nearly my end of contract I was acknowledged that I will not be continuing. And you know, I'm not sure if I can say this to you, but because of the funding, we have no choice. Just, I will say, yeah, we have no choice, but just to find choice. So my choice is I choose to study in Laos for master. The lesson from the COVID-19 period, is that I see people lost their job a lot. And this is also the lesson I passed. So, chosen to study master degree, I choose the major of development study. I want to become a future researcher in Laos. We just end our class last week, so I can have time for the podcast today. And now we are currently doing a developed proposal for thesis paper. I will say this subject, we have also international students come to study. Mostly, we will focus on the context of our country. We have many area of students. They might come from the environment, come from the social, come from the agriculture, health, also the children and nutrition. We have many students there. I do exchange a lot with them, quite the youngest person in the class. So my head must bow and be humble to study with them, because they are like very experienced person. Some of them also the manager. And the funny part is like most of them is from the same area as the community development persons. So, we kind of like exchange many things, very creative, very fun, a lot in the class. Somehow in my case happened in the past, it's also answer randomly by them. Like, they might change something and can giving me a guiding thought that I can use in the work. Yeah. So this cause, aside from the student, the professor, they provide us the journal, the report to practicing on reading, and we quite text a lot on researching, doing the paper for professor. Next two weeks, we will go to the field placement in the northern part. So we will visit the households that have the local alcohol product we call Lao Vodka. And it's quite giving the job opportunity in the people in the village. And also we have the hospital that do services for the youth and the family planning also. And we will visit one of the environmental zone. Yeah. So this is an update from my master class I'm having now.

Yasmine It sounds fascinating. So you'll stay with a host family while you're kind of getting to know that area and the people and what the concerns are for them?

Santa I think it will be something like that, kind of like that, because the professor again, they giving us a task to stay with the people, feel their culture, feel their life environment, what they do, what they live. So it's kind of like you observation, and sometimes you have, you participation with them. And yeah, it's broad. I will say it will be brought to the knowledge and at the same time, we brought a relationship in the community.

Yasmine Sure. So important. Do you know what you want to research yet, or is this part of the process of trying to see what the problems are that you'd like to solve?

Santa Not 100%. 90%, I would say, because I worked with Red Cross for many years as a volunteer. I think this is very important that I want to write the thesis paper about the quality

of the rescue services in Vientiane capital. Inside the thesis, the quality assessment for the rescue team, most of them are the volunteer and most of them graduate social work. One of my senior social work class person, they also work there and I also start to know Red Cross because of him. So he has this bachelor degree thesis and I want to develop that thesis for him. I think not just for him but I think it's also for all the rescue team that the policy level might hear something from my thesis and they can develop something to support the rescue team in Vientiane. Because the city is quite bigger now. We meet a lot of road accidents every day and kind of like trying the best to promote the road safety too in this thesis paper, because rescue volunteers, they work very hard. Some of them have to study and go back to the uni, work across midnight. And somehow they are treated well, I would say. But what they contribute to the community, to us, it's like very thing we have to giving back to them. For example, like maybe the policy level might hear like maybe giving them the scholarship or giving them the equipment more. Kind of like the things about my thesis want to have in their voice for this in about to hear. Yeah.

Yasmine Yeah.

Santa Not 100%.

Yasmine Sure. You still have to flesh it out a bit. Did you think going into social work, I know you said you had limited understanding of what the profession could be or what you might do to help people, did you think that there would be such a focus for you on policy and consultation? I just know for me, when I was studying, I always thought frontline, I want to work with the people, I want to do the direct work. And it wasn't until I did my second placement in community development and policy and research that I really understood social work can be so many things and we have so many skills. And yes, you need to understand the frontline if you do the policy work, because they inform each other so much, but yeah, I'm just wondering if you saw yourself or you imagined that social work could be so many things for you, or if you had a real clear idea as to what you thought you would be doing?

Santa After the graduation, I would say I have a plan to apply for one program. It's an international humanitarian program. I want to be the humanitarian person, focus on disaster, I would say. Emergency cases, disaster. Something like a big thing that happen immediately and we cannot control. So these are things that I want to develop in Laos because we are kind of like new. We have a team, we have operations, we have committee, but in the same time, we need to be developed. So I want to be a social worker who serve on the humanitarian event. Like, I would say, kind of like you support the same migrations, for example, or you support on the health crisis, something like this. This is the answer I still finding. But this is the scope I have now. Because our social work course is not directly in some part. As I know, like in some country, many country, they have critical social work. But compared to other country, they might have different social work style. I will say, I hope that after I graduate these classes, I might have a clear idea what type of social work I want to go through as my long-term career as a professional too, because you have to good at one thing. For me now, yeah, I think as experience I share with you, it's kind of like a broad experience, quite diverse. So I hope that I can narrow down a bit in the future, yeah.

Yasmine And it depends on availability and funding and so many other things, it sounds like, because you've got this passion and interest in things, but if there's no funding or there are no... you might have a clear idea of what you want to be doing but if the opportunity isn't there or the funding isn't there for a program, then there's no way of pursuing that, and that's really difficult.

Santa Yasmine, I think actually the things like job available and the situations we are having now, it's also teaching me. As a social worker, you have to be social worker for yourself too. Can I share this moment? Because of this situations now, this is quite tough for me too, to choose about, tomorrow. I still have hope to be social worker or not, or I should change my job to other field. This is the questions, everyday questions I have, I will say. And there was a moment I have very huge depression on that time, around April. I'm miserable. I don't know what to do. I will say I have a bit of tear on that time, because it's stressed me a lot. As I can say, it's like I got a job. I was starting soon on May. And then they said the funding just terminate. So everything I prepared is like, it's all gone. And yeah, this is quite a difficult moment I have to live on that time. I don't know if it's like the desire or not, but on that time, I also met one of my social work friends who graduated the same area like me. We met, we drink, we talk. And then I share lots of things with him, and he said just two sentences. He said that, Santa, you can be social work, but social work is not just only working, only giving people services or something like develop people how to cross their solutions, or so like that. But you can be a business person. You can open your shop. You can find other job. And then you give people a job availability. Or you're giving people knowledge you have. You're giving people the experience you have. I think that's already a social work. So to survive, I think that's different thing. But to be social work, I think you can do anything, but giving people hope, giving people the guiding, you already do your job every day. So yeah, that changed my perspective in different way. I quite not stress that much now. So focus on study, and hopefully that if I get a job, or things will be better, it will be better. So this is the things I keep talking to myself, yeah, on some difficult part that I almost leave this social work from my change in my head. Yeah.

Yasmine Yeah. And when you don't have that momentum, it's so destroying. And you've spent so much time to learn the profession and to get the experience and to make the connections. And then to have that ripped away from you, not for any fault of your own, that's really unfair. And yeah, it must have been really hard, but it sounds as though you heard that advice at the time that you needed it most. So that's a good friend. You need to hold onto that person.

Santa Yeah. I would say it's a miracle or not, but on the difficulty moment, you find a moment to have this answer that you search for, for many months. On that time I believe that my time will come. My time will come one day. My opportunity will come one day. So this time, be patient and cheers yourself a lot to have a good mental health. So ...

Yasmine With Laos being a developing country, is there much of a, we would call it a safety net for people who are disadvantaged or have come across a crisis or having difficulty even, just, you know, finding food or paying rent or being able to put clothes on their back. Is there some sort of coordinated government approach to help those people, or does it all end up being NGOs and non-government support?

Santa No, we work with the Government, and Government also support us, too.

Yasmine Okay.

Santa So, because of the, I will say not just the funding, but in the last 20 years, we don't have this kind of things in our country. We don't have mass centre. We don't have that type of services, but now we have many foundations. We have many services for the people with different problems, different situations they're facing now. So we work with the government a lot to support this part. I say this because I had this work directly, but in some provinces, I think

they might not have this full services. So I think in the long run, Laos will have this services for us in the future.

Yasmine That's great.

Santa Yeah. But we not only rely on the NGO part, Government will be work directly. But as the NGO and all the organisations, we work with the Government and also support the government to help this issue.

Yasmine No, that's really good to hear. But I imagine there are a lot of social workers working in those government roles as well. Even if they're not designated social work roles, there are still people who are social work background working in those areas.

Santa Because the social work is quite diverse, some of them might not work in the same area. They might work in the different areas. I would say 100%. They can have a choice to have different job, I would say. But as the context we're having now, we are working on it. So it's not going to be that fast, but it will be a long run. I think that's what I see in the context of the social work here.

Yasmine Are there any resources, anything that you've read or watched or come across, either in your study or in your practice, that you think other people might benefit from, and I can kind of find the links or find resources for people to share?

Santa I am not sure, but we have the CSO platform in Laos, and they share many case study things, work in the field. So they have a service society, organisations, some also the foundations also share their learning things in that platform. I will ask my friend who work as a CSO coordinator, can share you a link if they want to know more about community development job in Laos, I would say. But for myself, I don't have the paper released yet. So soon, if I graduate this one, I might have a paper released for myself. I will register some of the Google Scholar or the Script Scorpion for publish the paper. I will say in the future for myself, but yeah, for other people who want to know about the rural development for social work in Laos, they can have this platform on my side.

Yasmine Yeah, great. Thank you for that. Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about? I know you've got a lot of things planned, a lot of things that you'd love to do, and it's just a matter of finding the opportunity and finding the time, because you want to do everything at once and you only have so much time available. And also, you're trying to finish your studies and you've got the placement coming up, but is there anything else that you wanted to talk about, whether it's just about what your experience has been like or what you love about social work?

Santa I still believe that social work is a core bone for the community development. I think aside from the volunteer doing, that I have the motivations to apply this education and having jobs in this field, is because of my father. So he inspired me a lot, because he worked as the village committee. He helped people have jobs. He helped his cousin have the choice to live. And as a kid at that time, I had this communication skill with many people in the village, and it's built a strong boundary for me, that until today I can support my village itself as a volunteer social worker, and say not a social worker.

Yasmine Yeah.

Santa For me, only one word that I can give you, is that you can start again. If you lose today, if you don't have hope today, if you don't know where to go today, you can start again tomorrow. You can start to do things again. You still have a hope. So that's a word I can give for you.

Yasmine I love that. That's so good. And thank you so, so much for sharing all of that and just for giving us an idea of how things have progressed with you right from that volunteer support that you did at the beginning. And as you said now, that was inspired by your father and what he's done for your village and trying to understand what your passion might be or what area of work. Who knows, you might've ended up being a doctor if you'd gone into medicine, but I feel like you would have still very much been helping people regardless of what you do, because that's in your bones, that's in your genetics, it sounds like. So just being able to do those volunteer services, interviewing people even, is a good way to understand their context or what their situation is, or what they might be having difficulty with or even what their strengths are. You know, what has worked for them in the past, and then helping them to harness those strengths to use in future with whatever difficulty is coming up for them. So it's been a very clear journey that I can see that has had a lot of hurdles on the way and a lot of things that have gotten in the way of you progressing as quickly as you'd like to, but I feel like also in such a short time, you've done so much. So anything that you do from now, you'll take that experience and you'll build on that.

Santa Yeah. I think that's will be the starting point. So for my side of experience, this will be like this, but hopefully they will have more people in Laos to share about their works. So this will be a spotlight, I would say.

Yasmine No, I'd love that. I'd love to know more people and get a sense of how things work in different countries. And it's been interesting for me to see the similarities as well, between the two countries, because so much of your starting point and your training has been very similar to how we do things. So it is interesting to see how across the board there's a lot of consistency, but the specific work that you're doing and how you do it is going to be very unique to Laos. So yeah, thank you again so much for doing this and for sharing your experience. And I hope to continue following what you do, because whatever it is, I think you're just going to continue helping more people.

Santa Yeah.

Thanks for joining me this week. If you would like to continue this discussion or ask anything of either myself or Santa, please visit my Anchor page at anchor.fm/socialworkspotlight, you can find me on Facebook, Instagram and Blue Sky or you can email swspotlightpodcast@gmail.com. I'd love to hear from you.

Next episode's guest is Matt, who in addition to being a registered social worker, is also a certified mental performance consultant, podcast host and co-founder of Southwest Counselling Services in Ontario, Canada. He is passionate about utilising a variety of tools including EMDR, Emotion Focused Therapy, Sport Psychology and Psychedelic Assisted Psychotherapy to help individuals, couples and families lead healthy and fulfilling lives.

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