

# NAVIGATING CHALLENGES IN ARMENIA'S SOCIAL PROTECTION SECTOR: THE ROLE AND REFORM OF THE UNIFIED SOCIAL SERVICE

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## ***Introduction***

Since gaining independence, Armenia has made significant strides in developing a social protection system rooted in the principles of human dignity, social justice, and citizen welfare [UNICEF, 2021, 37-78; ILO, 2021, 39-61].<sup>1</sup> The formation of the Unified Social Service (USS) was a major step toward centralizing social services, aimed at creating a more cohesive, responsive, and comprehensive framework for addressing the social needs of Armenia's population.<sup>2</sup> However, the USS faces numerous operational and structural challenges that hinder its effectiveness, highlighting a need for reform and a reevaluation of its current strategies. Global tendencies showcase that the effectiveness of social service provision is determined primarily by unifying those services under one platform equipped with digital technologies [Rai, Shivani, 2023, 73-82], and in this context, the introduction of the USS is a vital undertaking for Armenia, taking into consideration the volatility of the socio-economic and political developments occurring not only in the region but taking over the globe. For instance, according to the World Economic Forum's Chief Economists' Outlook [2024, 7], 56% of respondents expected that the global economy is likely to continue weakening in 2024. In this context, having strong institutes could potentially help bounce off the global and in-house challenges [Mecklin, 2021, as cited in Shaheed, Ameer, 2021, 8-9]. The purpose of this article is to analyze the structural and operational challenges facing Armenia's USS following its recent consolidation and to recommend practical reforms to improve its efficiency and responsiveness in delivering social support. By examining the current state of the USS's integration, regional distribution, digitalization efforts, and human resource management, the article aims to provide insights that will inform more effective service delivery within Armenia's social protection framework.

## ***Research methodology***

This article employs a qualitative research methodology, focusing primarily on document analysis to trace the development and current structure of Armenia's USS. Key legisla-

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<sup>1</sup> RA Government Decision N 952-N "On the Approval of the Program for Introducing an Integrated Social Services System in the Republic of Armenia," dated July 26, 2012, (<https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docID=85615>).

<sup>2</sup> Unified Social Service, "About Us," (<https://socservice.am/about-us>).

tive documents, policy papers, and procedural guidelines were examined to understand the foundational framework and ongoing adjustments within the USS. Furthermore, primary qualitative data collection was executed via key informant interviews with specialists in the social service field to obtain insights on the present issues encountered by USS. A purposive sampling method was employed in order to identify key informants with the necessary expertise and knowledge. The study engaged eight interviews. The final number of interviews conducted did not exceed ten since there was data saturation at this level. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. To interpret the interview data, thematic analysis was employed, where interview transcripts were partitioned into themes and patterns for easy understanding. The interviews were conducted in Armenian language, and after securing transcribed text, they were translated into English. For the interviews, the following procedural ethical measures [Guillemin et al., 2004, 261–280] were undertaken:

- *Informed Consent*: informed consent is obtained from all participants during the key informant interviews.
- *Confidentiality and Anonymity*: the information collected from participants is kept confidential and anonymous.
- *Data Protection*: data is stored securely, it is not shared with unauthorized parties, and it will be deleted or destroyed when it is no longer needed.

The integration of document analysis with primary data-based content analysis<sup>1</sup> provided a thorough understanding of the USS's role and function in Armenia's social protection system, yielding important insights into the factors affecting its efficacy and opportunities for sustainable improvement. In addition to the qualitative method, descriptive statistics were utilized to support the interview data, particularly regarding the wage gap between the public and private sectors.

### ***Literature review***

This article's literature review is informed by a diverse array of sources, such as academic studies, governmental documents, and international reports about service integration and social protection. Foundational documents, including Armenia's Law on Social Assistance<sup>2</sup>, Law on State Allowances<sup>1</sup>, and Law on State Pensions<sup>2</sup>, offered critical insights

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<sup>1</sup> Content analysis was adopted as a method for generalizing expert data from interviews since it essentially functions as a probabilistic method used for statistical inference, allowing for the mapping of observable features of the text—words and phrases—to broader conceptual latent variables [Lowe, 2004, 25-27]. By focusing on the latent meanings embedded in textual data, this method allowed us to systematically draw conclusions about the themes and patterns underlying participants' responses.

<sup>2</sup> RA Law “On Social Assistance” adopted on December 17, 2014 (<https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=180959>).

into the legal and structural framework that supported the social protection system. These documents provide crucial insights into the legal and structural framework. To position Armenia's social protection reforms within a broader global context, the article also consulted comparative studies and best practice guidelines from international organizations, such as the United Nations Development Programme [UNDP, 2021, 71-106], International Labour Organization [ILO, 2021, 39-61], and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD, 2018, 21-57]. These sources offered insights into integrated social service models, highlighting international trends and innovations that could inform Armenia's approach to social protection.

In terms of analyzing the Armenian context of reforming social protection systems, the study focuses on several important policy texts, including the RA Government Program for 2021-2026<sup>3</sup>, the Strategic Program of Prospective Development of the Republic of Armenia for 2014-2025<sup>4</sup> and the Armenia Transformation Strategy 2050<sup>5</sup>. The examination of the above documents is aimed at identifying the required structures, goals, and how the ISS system was to be operationalized.

The article also draws on academic research to theoretically support its arguments, analyzes the problems and proposes solutions for Armenia's Unified Social Service (USS). Rai and Shivani's [2023] study has been cited to highlight the value of integrating social services through digital platforms, a strategy particularly relevant to addressing global economic uncertainty [World Economic Forum, 2024; Shaheed & Ameer, 2021]. To discuss the outdated procedures and rules in the USS, the analysis refers to Jessop and Nielsen's [2003] work, which emphasizes the critical role of normative stability in ensuring institutional functionality. In the part of examining the territorial dimensions of social services, the findings of Jugl et al. [2024] are utilized to critique population-based resource allocation criteria and advocate for regional approaches tailored to the unique needs of small communities. Estonia's successful digital transformation is brought to the table through the work of Bura et al. [2017] and Vassil [2015], demonstrating how digital systems can improve operational efficiency and data management in social services. Charries Rivera's [2018] research was used to highlight the need for professional supervision and follow-up mechanisms, which are necessary to better social work and case

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<sup>1</sup> RA Law "On State Allowances" adopted on December 12, 2013 (<https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=186727>).

<sup>2</sup> RA Law "On State Pensions" adopted on December 22, 2010 (<https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=64540>).

<sup>3</sup> Government of Armenia, "2021-2026 RA Government Program," pp. 67-71 (<https://www.gov.am/files/docs/4586.pdf>).

<sup>4</sup> Government of Armenia, "Republic of Armenia 2014-2025 Strategic Program of Prospective Development," pp. 116-118 (<https://www.gov.am/files/docs/1322.pdf>).

<sup>5</sup> Government of Armenia, "Armenia Transformation Strategy 2050," ([https://www.primeminister.am/u\\_files/file/Haytararutyunner/Armenia2050\\_7\\_5.pdf](https://www.primeminister.am/u_files/file/Haytararutyunner/Armenia2050_7_5.pdf)).

management. In addition, Sapru's [2020] study strengthens the argument for the introduction of unified digital systems and feedback tools that will allow USS to dynamically respond to the needs of beneficiaries and meet global social protection standards.

### ***Scientific Novelty***

This article provides a unique contribution to the field of social policy by offering an in-depth analysis of Armenia's USS from both an organizational and strategic perspective. It integrates structural and operational perspectives within a single framework, presenting a comprehensive evaluation of the USS's performance. By identifying specific operational gaps and proposing evidence-based recommendations, the article offers a novel roadmap for enhancing the efficiency and inclusivity of Armenia's social protection services, contributing valuable insights to both national policy discussions and the broader field of public administration reform.

### ***Analysis***

#### *Document Analysis of Current Legislation and Strategic Documents*

The Republic of Armenia has adopted the principles of promoting social justice, enhancing societal welfare, and valuing human dignity since achieving independence.<sup>1</sup> Not only are these ideals fundamental, but they also serve as guiding priorities in the development of Armenia's policy, particularly in the social sector.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA) of the Republic of Armenia serves as a key republican executive authority entrusted with the development and implementation of governmental policies in labor and social security.<sup>2</sup> In its capacity as the primary institution in Armenia's social governance framework, the MoLSA is instrumental in the development and implementation of a diverse range of policies that are designed to improve the social welfare and security of the population. The MoLSA is dedicated to the establishment of a fair and equitable work environment, the resolution of employment challenges, the enforcement of safe working conditions, and the promotion of the preservation of workers' rights in the field of labor. At the same time, the MoLSA is responsible for the development and implementation of social security programs that offer financial assistance and services to vulnerable populations. These programs include social assistance, disability benefits, and pensions.<sup>3</sup>

The MoLSA is responsible for the formulation and implementation of comprehensive policies in a variety of social welfare sectors, as outlined in Armenia's "On the Structure

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<sup>1</sup> RA Constitution, "Chapter 1: Constitutional Order Foundations," adopted on June 12, 2015 (<https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=143723>).

<sup>2</sup> RA Government, "Structure: Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs" (<https://www.gov.am/am/structure/16/>).

<sup>3</sup> RA Law "On Government Structure and Activity," adopted on March 23, 2018 (<https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=195408>).

and Activities of the Government" law. This mandate is all-encompassing, covering a diverse range of domains, including social security, voluntary work, employment support, and labor and social protection for individuals with transitory disabilities. The Ministry also supervises policies concerning the provision of integrated social services, social assistance, and state pensions.

Furthermore, the MoLSA is instrumental in the development of social housing policies, the management of social protection for families, women, children, and individuals with disabilities, and the protection of the elderly. The MoLSA is responsible for the integration or reintegration of vulnerable groups, including refugees, displaced persons, long-term migrants, and forcibly returned Armenian citizens who have sought asylum. The objective of these endeavors is to cultivate social unity and establish a support system for those who require assistance.

In accordance with the Law "On State Management System Bodies," the MoLSA administers the delivery of social services through various methods, striving to guarantee optimal accessibility and efficiency for diverse segments of the population<sup>1</sup>. Social services are predominantly provided through the USS, which consolidates the functions of state social service delivery structures to facilitate the rapid and comprehensive provision of services. In its supervisory role, the MoLSA monitors and regulates the entire service delivery process as the authority overseeing the USS, ensuring that services are provided in compliance with national standards and meet the needs of Armenia's diverse and vulnerable populations. This structured approach aims to create a comprehensive, accessible, and effective social support network across Armenia, fostering a more resilient society through well-coordinated and government-supported social services.

The USS is a critical element of the Armenian Integrated Social Services System. In contrast to the USS direct provision of isolated services, the integrated system includes a broader array of support, combining resources and expertise from a variety of sectors. The integrated system includes essential services from healthcare, education, and local government bodies, in addition to the social services rendered by the MoLSA, such as those accessible through USS Territorial Centers (TCs). Within the social protection system, the USS serves as the central coordinator of this integrated approach. The USS is tasked with the oversight and management of the delivery of diverse social services, ensuring that the social support process is organized to adequately address the requirements of each beneficiary in a comprehensive and efficient manner.

In accordance with the RA government's 2015 decision (N 1061-N), the USS comprises four primary entities within Armenia's social protection system: territorial social security

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<sup>1</sup> RA Law "On State Management System Bodies," adopted on March 23, 2018 (<https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docID=120920>).

centers, medical and social examination units, the state employment agency, and others.<sup>1</sup> This integration improves the quality of service and the efficacy of the process in the provision of social support. Pensions, benefits, employment programs, social needs assessments, and medical expertise are all under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Affairs. The USS offers comprehensive social services in four primary service categories through 49 regional centers, ensuring that individuals in difficult life circumstances receive targeted support.

The constitutional framework of Armenia strongly emphasized the protection of citizens' rights and social welfare, thereby establishing the groundwork for a developing system of social policies and legislation designed to promote and protect the well-being of the populace. Significant legislative measures encompass the Law on Social Assistance, delineating provisions for financial and non-financial aid to at-risk populations,<sup>2</sup> and the Law on State Benefits, which pertains to entitlements including child and family benefits<sup>3</sup>. The Law on State Pensions delineates the structure for pensions related to old age, disability, and survivorship,<sup>4</sup> whereas the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stipulates equal opportunities and safeguards for individuals with disabilities<sup>5</sup>. The Law on Employment delineates the state's obligations in fostering stable employment and mitigating unemployment rates. The MoLSA and USS depend on these laws to direct their operations, utilizing their provisions to establish priorities and formulate policies. Each legislative act serves as a fundamental framework, assisting these bodies in addressing critical social demands, including poverty alleviation, social inclusion, and employment security. These laws guide the strategic objectives of these entities, acting as standards to guarantee that social services conform to national principles of equity, social justice, and the safeguarding of vulnerable populations. The MoLSA and USS operations are legally established and aim at promoting a more inclusive and resilient society through extensive social assistance and protection initiatives.

Recent reforms in Armenia's social sector have implemented various structural and functional modifications designed to improve the efficacy of social support services. These reforms have underscored specific domains within the social sector that necessitate ad-

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<sup>1</sup> RA Government Decision N 1061-N "On Exercising the Authority of Territorial Bodies Providing Social Services and on Establishing the Procedures and Conditions for Social Service Provision," dated September 10, 2015 (<https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docID=100588>).

<sup>2</sup> RA Law "On Social Assistance" adopted on December 17, 2014 (<https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=180959>).

<sup>3</sup> RA Law "On State Allowances" adopted on December 12, 2013 (<https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=186727>).

<sup>4</sup> RA Law "On State Pensions" adopted on December 22, 2010 (<https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=64540>).

<sup>5</sup> RA Law "On Employment" adopted on December 11, 2013 (<https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=199715>).

ditional legislative examination, modification, and enhancement. The resulting need for a unified and consistent regulatory approach has resulted in the decision to invalidate the current "On Social Assistance" law and replace it with a more comprehensive and up-to-date law.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this new law is to address existing voids and ensure consistency among related legal frameworks, thereby establishing a unified and effective foundation for social support in Armenia.

In summary, the USS is a governmental entity supervised by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of the Republic of Armenia. It is responsible for managing a wide range of services in the field of social protection. Founded in 2021, the USS represents a significant advancement in the consolidation and optimization of social protection services across the nation. The USS employs a comprehensive strategy for social security by combining services in four fundamental domains: social assistance, employment, social insurance, and medico-social expertise. This is executed via a comprehensive network of 49 regional centers, including the whole territory of the Republic of Armenia<sup>2</sup>.

In Armenia, the USS brings together social services, which employ different methods depending on the nature of the services offered. Social insurance-related services are managed at the central level. Social assistance-related services, such as those provided by TCs are much more complicated in terms of providing direct contact between social workers and the beneficiaries needing the services. Since these services involve unique, individualized needs, they cannot be fully digitized; social workers at TCs conduct detailed assessments of beneficiaries' situations to determine eligibility based on their current needs. This two-part system allows the USS to handle straightforward cash benefits efficiently while still offering thorough, personalized support for more complex cases, making it adaptable to a wide range of needs across the population.

#### ***Challenges Faced by the Unified Social Service (based on the Interview Data)***

Armenia's USS is under a number of constraints that adversely affect its capacity to deliver effective and timely social services. After a comprehensive analysis of the content of the interview data and the identification of common patterns and themes presented in the respondents' responses, it can be concluded that the main challenges are rooted in structural, managerial, and resource factors, which require immediate reform. Based on the content analysis and in-depth investigation of other procedural and structural specifics of the USS system, Table 1 has been compiled to categorize the main challenges faced by the entity.

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<sup>1</sup> Unified Website for Publication of Legal Acts' Drafts, "Draft "On Social Assistance" and Other Laws" (<https://www.e-draft.am/en/projects/4673/justification>).

<sup>2</sup> Unified Social Service, "About Us," (<https://socservice.am/about-us>).

**Table 1.** Challenges faced by the RA Unified Social Service

CHALLENGE CATEGORY	SPECIFIC CHALLENGES
<i>Structural and Organizational Challenges</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Incomplete consolidation of procedures after the merger of four constituent bodies.</li> <li>- Retention of obsolete systems and practices undermining comprehensive service delivery.</li> </ul>
<i>Regional Imbalances in Service Allocation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Resource allocation based solely on population numbers, ignoring regional social needs.</li> <li>- Uneven distribution of territorial centers, leading to service imbalances.</li> </ul>
<i>Operational Issues at Reception Centers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Absence of a well-defined process for service provision.</li> <li>- Lack of integrated information systems for data access and electronic processing.</li> <li>- No advisory toolkit and limited staff education, affecting advisory roles.</li> <li>- No documentation or performance feedback for self-assessment.</li> </ul>
<i>Challenges in Social Work and Employment Programs</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Undefined task limits for social case managers, causing excessive workloads and burnout.</li> <li>- Insufficient professional oversight and quality control measures.                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Shadow work, lack of follow-up in employment programs.</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Fragmentation of employment and social services leading to inconsistent case management.</li> </ul>
<i>Need for Digital Transformation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inefficiencies caused by lack of digital transformation in service delivery.</li> <li>- Need for total digitization to streamline processes and improve data management.</li> </ul>
<i>Human Resources Challenges</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low public sector salaries compared to private sector, discouraging recruitment.</li> <li>- Bureaucratic hiring processes, inefficient HR system.</li> <li>- Negative organizational reputation as inflexible and rigid.</li> <li>- Absence of feedback and key performance indicators (KPIs) in performance management.</li> <li>- Limited promotion opportunities, leading to low employee motivation.</li> </ul>

One of the primary problems arises from the incomplete consolidation of procedures and business processes following the merger of the four constituent bodies into a single USS entity. It was expected the unification of these separate bodies into the USS would regionalize social services, but the centralization process of these bodies has not resulted in a thorough alteration of existing processes and practices. The absence of a well-defined, integrated process undermines the fundamental objective of providing comprehensive social assistance services. As mentioned in Institutions and Rules [Jessop et al., 2003, 4-5], rules and overall procedures play a crucial role in shaping institutions by defining and regulating the behavior and interactions within them, and without this regulatory frame-



work, it is hardly possible to maintain the stability and functionality of institutions. Due to a lack of regulatory rules and procedures, disintegration has occurred where there should have been smooth integration. Moreover, current configuration has retained obsolete systems and rules, which are a result of organizational inefficiencies within USS.

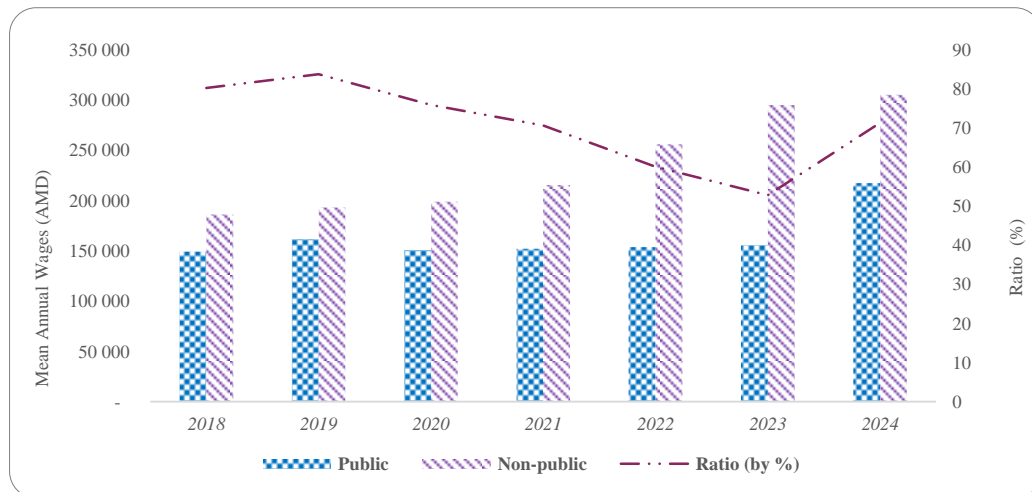
The selection of USS territorial centers, primarily based on population numbers and Armenian administrative divisions, fails to consider the unique social profiles and needs of each region. While recent evidence shows that, contrary to the long-standing scientific assumption that small population sizes can potentially lead to 'patronage-based' service provision and thus undermine legitimate decision-making [Jugl, Marlene, et al., 2024], it is nevertheless vital to take into account all the needs of small and remote communities. This population-based approach to resource allocation frequently results in regional service imbalances, where regions with more severe social requirements may be underserved while other regions may have excess capacity. Currently, there are 49 USS offices across Armenia, primarily located in the Yerevan (7), Shirak (6), Lori (5), and Gegharkunik (5) regions, indicating an uneven distribution.

Furthermore, the USS territorial centers Reception is experiencing operational issues due to the absence of a well-defined process for service provision. This results in inefficiency and chaos as the law is not thoroughly enforced. The lack of an integrated information system makes it impossible to quickly access data and process documents electronically, which is a requirement in service delivery systems that are up to date. In addition, The Reception has no advisory toolkit, and, in combination with scant education, employees do not offer enough advice and, therefore, abuse the advisory role they are given by the law. Overall, failing to document the services provided and failing to provide performance feedback have a detrimental impact on self-assessments and the creation of fresh approaches to address the beneficiaries' requirements.

The USS also has considerable obstacles in the successful provision of social work and employment programs. According to the respondents, social case managers function without a defined task limit, resulting in excessive caseloads, heightened burnout risk, and deteriorating service quality. Insufficient professional oversight, along with inadequate quality control measures and a dearth of statistical data, hinders the ability to assess and improve service delivery [Pikkarainen, Minna, et al., 2020, 28–33]. Employment programs encounter challenges related to shadow work, insufficient follow-up on job placements, and a deficiency in competent counseling, which undermines beneficiaries' incorporation into the formal labor market. These challenges are further exacerbated by the separation of employment and social services within the USS, which results in a fragmented approach to case management. The USS is unable to provide targeted, consistent support to beneficiaries without a standardized, unified approach and improved resource allocation. This underscores the necessity of systemic reforms in both social work and

employment support programs. The USS is also in need of digital transformation. Despite the availability of technical solutions, the present state of the processes within the USS is causing them to diminish, resulting in inefficiencies from the intake to the provision of service. Curbing such inefficiencies by total digitization of processes will enhance service delivery, cut down on manual tasks, and improve data management. This change is also necessary to move the USS forward, integrate it into global standard practices in the social service delivery sector, such as digitalization pioneer Estonia [Buhr et al., 2017, 3].

Another major area of concern is the risk of deficiency in human resources. The recruitment and performance management systems in the USS of Armenia are facing several challenges that, to some extent, reduce their efficiency and hinder the recruitment and retention of competent individuals. The ratio of salaries in the public sector compared to the private sector is still low even though the discrepancy tends to shrink in recent years and acts as a disincentive to recruitment (quantitative reasoning for the wage differences of public-non-public sectors is illustrated in Chart 1).<sup>1</sup> Bureaucratic processes of hiring and a lack of an effective HR system further exacerbate this issue. The reputation of the USS, which many perceive as an inflexible organization with a rigid attitude, further complicates matters. Performance management is problematic due to the absence of feedback and key performance indicators (KPIs), which complicates the assessment and improvement of employees' contributions. Additionally, the absence of comprehensive compensation and restricted promotional opportunities often results in individuals feeling unmotivated and inactive. In general, there is a general sense of urgency for institutional change to enhance the organization's elasticity and flexibility to respond to radical shifts, as well as to improve service delivery and workforce retention.



**Chart 1.** Main annual nominal wages by sectors (AMD)

<sup>1</sup> The chart was compiled by the author based on: <https://armstat.am/en/?nid=964>.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, although the USS in Armenia signifies a substantial advancement towards a more cohesive and accessible social support framework, various structural, operational, and resource-related obstacles impede its efficacy. The insufficient integration of business processes post-USS merger, inadequate geographic distribution of centers, absence of standardized procedures, and lack of digital transformation collectively result in inefficiencies that hinder USS's ability to deliver efficient, high-quality services. The challenges are exacerbated by constrained resources, inadequate personnel, and insufficient training, which hinder social workers and their capacity to provide individualized help. The lack of a cohesive information system, advisory toolkit, feedback mechanisms, and quality control procedures undermines the USS's capacity to monitor, assess, and improve service quality.

An increased emphasis should be placed on improving social work and employment programs. In the absence of measurable burden limits, professional supervision, follow-up mechanisms, and efficient employment measures, case management is impeded, and beneficiaries are alienated from the labor market [Charriez Rivera, Grace, 2018, 18-24]. In this regard, there are compelling reasons to pursue significant reforms in social work and employment support, as well as the quality of case management and inter-agency collaboration.

Several solutions could be made to address these challenges. The first phase is to examine and efficiently integrate USS scopes and procedures to eliminate redundancy, improve service delivery, and accomplish the goals of USS amalgamation. Developing a standardized workload threshold for case managers, along with improved supervision and training, can alleviate pressure on social workers and enhance service quality. In addition, the introduction of a unified information system and digitalization of key processes will enhance the efficiency of data management, speed up the provision of services, and improve the monitoring of beneficiaries' needs, as has been implemented, for instance, in relatively comparable Estonia [Vassil, Kristjan, 2015, 11-19]. Strengthening employment programs through focused counseling, continuous follow-up, and incentives for formal work would also reduce reliance on social assistance and enhance economic inclusion.

In addition to these structural and operational measures, promoting a more people-centered approach within the USS is critical. This can be accomplished by improving the advisory function at the Reception through training programs and the creation of a comprehensive advisory toolbox, which will enable staff to provide well-rounded assistance on a greater range of social issues. Establishing a structured and preferably digital feedback mechanism will also allow the USS to collect insights from beneficiaries, adapt to their requirements more dynamically, and make informed changes to service delivery [Sapru et al., 2020, 297-311]. Furthermore, a regular publication of performance metrics, inclu-

ding statistics on service usage, case management, and outcomes, can promote transparency and accountability, enabling stakeholders and the public to better understand the USS's impact and areas for improvement. These measures, combined with a proactive commitment to continuous improvement, will help the USS build stronger, trust-based relationships with beneficiaries and establish a more adaptive, resilient social services framework capable of responding to Armenia's evolving social landscape.

Lastly, increased human resources are necessary in order to effectively oversee the large caseloads and ensure equitable distribution of social case managers across the country. Enacting these recommendations could make the USS a more efficient, effective, and fair social support system, capable of meeting the wide range and changing demands of Armenia's social patterns while also fostering resilience and social cohesion within the country.

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**Navigating Challenges in Armenia's Social Protection Sector: The Role and Reform of the Unified Social Service**

*Key words: social reforms, Unified Social Services (USS), client-centered social protection, operational challenges, Armenia, social service delivery, human resources*

This article explores Armenia's efforts to reform its social protection sector, focusing on the Unified Social Service (USS) as a central institution in delivering and coordinating social services. Following Armenia's recent social reforms, the USS was established to create a more integrated, client-centered approach to social welfare, encompassing social assistance, insurance, and employment support. Despite its potential, the USS faces significant challenges in achieving its goals, including issues related to human resource shortages, operational inefficiencies, and digital transformation needs. Through an analysis of the USS's structural and procedural limitations, this article examines the underlying factors that hinder its effectiveness and offers practical recommendations for improvement. The article underscores the importance of improved performance management, expanded support for social workers and employment programs, streamlined processes, and an improved digital infrastructure. The purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive framework for the improvement of Armenia's social protection system and the promotion of resilience and inclusivity throughout the country.