

INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF SOCIAL CASE MANAGEMENT IN ARMENIA

Yevgine Vardanyan, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7975-0768>

PhD in Sociology, Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work and Social Technologies, Yerevan State University, Armenia. Email: yevginevardanyan@ysu.am

Abstract: Social case management is widely applied in organizations providing social services in Armenia. However, the extent to which it has been institutionalized within the national social service system remains unclear. This article addresses this gap by combining theoretical perspectives on institutionalization with findings from qualitative research conducted among social service providers in Armenia. The results indicate that, although social case management has undergone significant institutional development, it has not yet been fully institutionalized. In particular, regulative and normative components—such as legal frameworks, policies, and professional standards—are largely established, while the cultural-cognitive dimension, including mutual recognition, legitimization, and consistent application of standardized approaches, remains underdeveloped across governmental, community-based, and non-governmental organizations. The article contributes to the field by conceptualizing social case management as a methodology, clarifying its relationship with social work, and providing a structured analysis of its institutionalization process in the Armenian context.

Keywords: *social case management, social work, integrated social services, methodology, institutionalization.*

Conceptualization of Social Case Management and Its Institutionalization in Social Services' System

The concept of *social case management*, although widely studied and interpreted, still lacks an exhaustive definition and a universally agreed interpretation. In 2016 a group of authors studying interpretations of social case management concluded that, approximately 80 studies published between 1988 and 2013, more than 22 definitions of the concept and over 5 models had been formulated, and around 70 functions attributed to social case managers had been identified (Lukersmith, et al., 2016). This statistic demonstrates the considerable difficulty of presenting a clear and unambiguous definition of social case management.

Differences in approaches become obvious already at the level of defining the concept of social case management. Some definitions emphasize its role in ensuring the



coordinated provision of diverse services across multiple sectors (social, healthcare, educational, and others) to beneficiaries.

For example, according to Sue Lukersmith's , social case management is the coordination of social, healthcare, and other services and their systematic provision to the beneficiary, through which the individual gains opportunities for recovery and social inclusion (Lukersmith, 2017).

Social case management is also of central importance in the process of service integration (Vardanyan, 2024). This implies that in all situations where there is a need to integrate services and provide them in a coordinated manner, social case management becomes the mechanism that can be used with that purpose.

Authors such as Howard M. Schwartz, Irwin Rubinstein, and others in their definitions of social case management emphasize its application in addressing complex needs conditioned by causal ties. They argue that social case management enables the provision of a multidisciplinary and coordinated response to such needs (Schwarz, 2023).

The National Association of Social Workers defines social case management as a method through which a case manager assesses, organizes, coordinates, and monitors different services provided to meet the multiple or complex needs of a beneficiary (NASW, 2013).

Theorists such as Nigel Woodside and Trudy McClam define social case management as a method of social work or a professional function aimed at ensuring a client-centered approach and promoting the realization and protection of beneficiaries' rights within the social service system (Woodside, McCalm, 2013). Furthermore, through social case management, beneficiaries are able to navigate more quickly and effectively within the system of services across different sectors (Frankel, et al., 2019).

There are also theories that consider the role of social case management within deinstitutionalization processes to be crucial, noting its importance in all cases where initiatives or interventions aimed at deinstitutionalization are implemented ((Lukersmith, et al., 2016). This is due to the fact that social case management enables the provision of coordinated and needs-based services to beneficiaries within the community.

Accordingly, social case management is also important within the framework of decentralization approaches and in the implementation of integrated service systems at the community level (Moxely, 1989).

The question of how social case management emerged and what historical trajectory it has followed also requires examination.

Social case management, as a practice somewhat distinct from social work, began to develop during the 1960s–1970s as a response to the intensive development of social protection systems, the introduction of new social services, the expansion of service coverage, and the deinstitutionalization movement (Lukersmith, et al., 2016).

At the same time, one of the main drivers for the application of social case management practices was the fragmentation of social services and the discontinuity in service provision processes. This necessitated the systematic and continuous delivery of services, ensured by social case management.

Alongside its application, social case management practices began to undergo institutionalization, becoming widely used method across various sectors (healthcare, child protection, care provision).

At present, social case management, being adopted across different sectors, aims to ensure a specialized and multidimensional approach to addressing the complex needs of beneficiaries.

In this regard, the relationship between social work and social case management is also noteworthy. Widely applied by social workers and spreading across all fields of social work, social case management has been consolidated and substantiated as a method of social work (Antonyan, et al., 2023).

Although there are approaches according to which social case management is considered a supportive variation of casework as a primary method, it has, in both practice and theoretical interpretations, significantly diverged from casework—particularly from individual, group, and family social work methods—and has acquired a distinct emphasis. Unlike these methods, or more generally the casework method, social case management emphasizes the principles of service coordination, cooperation, accessibility, and comprehensiveness.

Casework methods are therapeutic methods of social work, where priority is given to behavioral change, emotional support, capacity building, and relationship management (Barker, 2014). In contrast, within social case management, emphasis is placed on ensuring the coordinated provision of services aimed at meeting the diverse and complex needs of the beneficiaries.

Thus, social case management can be considered as a method of social work that is primarily applied by social workers in working with individuals or families with complex needs or high levels of social risk (Antonyan, et al. 2023).

At the same time, there are sufficient grounds to interpret social case management also as a methodology. Methodology is generally understood as a system of methods or techniques (Cambridge dictionary, 2026).

It is also interpreted as a theoretically grounded set of several methods and the techniques derived from them, aimed at achieving specific objectives.

The key characteristics of a methodology are:

1. theoretical foundations,
2. clearly defined objectives,
3. combined application of methods and techniques aimed at achieving those objectives (Callaos, 2014).

Based on this description, it can be asserted that social case management has all the prerequisites to be characterized as a methodology, if we take into account the following considerations:

1. Social case management has theoretical foundations.

Social case management is based on the theories or theoretical approaches that social work methodology is based on. The application of social work's theoretical foundation is vast and leverage case management intervention with individuals, couples, families, groups, and communities (Flink-Samnack, 2023).

As social work, social case management theoretical bases include the following theories or theoretical approaches:

- Systems theory that allows social case management to be defined as a system with structural elements, functional clarity, defined objectives, and interconnections between structure and function; Based on the systems theory, social case managers develop and improve support systems, including service delivery system, resources, opportunities, and naturally occurring social supports, that advance the well-being of individuals, families and communities (NASW, 2013). Systems theory also helps social case managers to navigate complex systems on behalf of clients and families (Flink-Samnack, 2023).
- The humanistic or person in environment approach emphasizes the interaction between the individual and the social environment, and the importance of a comprehensive approach to the individual's resources, risks and needs (NASW, 2013);
- Social exchange approach fuels a case manager's efforts to target macro or mezzo-level systemic issues and make changes in the service delivery systems. Within this approach social workers try also to mitigate disparities and social injustices promoting changes in systems' functioning, in the environment, relations and behavior models of the clients (Flink-Samnack, 2023).
- Strengths-based approaches, which emphasize identifying and reinforcing the beneficiary's strengths and promoting empowerment (NASW, 2013);
- Developmental theory, according to which social case management is aimed at developing the beneficiary's capacities and expanding opportunities and resources (Antonyan, et. al, 2023).

At the same time, social case management is also grounded in other theoretical approaches that form the basis of social work.

2. Social case management has clearly defined objectives.

The primary goal of social case management is to optimize client functioning and well-being by providing and coordinating high-quality services, in the most effective and efficient manner possible to individuals with multiple complex needs (NASW, 2013).

From this goal the main objectives of social case management stem that are: main objectives of social case management:

- ensuring the beneficiary's independence and self-sufficiency,
- promoting social inclusion within the community,
- providing integrated and coordinated social services,
- ensuring accessibility, targeting, and continuity of services (Giardino, De Jesus, 2023).

These objectives derive from key paradigms such as:

- comprehensive assessment and systematic use of individual and community resources,
- provision of service packages based on individual needs,
- ensuring the highest possible level of independent, socially inclusive functioning and self-sufficiency (Antonyan, et al., 2023).

3. Multiple methods are applied within social case management.

These include, for example, individual, group, and family work, methods of service coordination and mapping, other related methods or techniques. Social case

management ensures the systematic application of these methods and their associated techniques.

Thus, within the framework of this study, we will consider social case management as a **methodology** used in social work aimed at providing coordinated, needs-based services to beneficiaries with complex needs or high levels of risk, as well as ensuring their social inclusion, independent functioning, and self-sufficiency.

We should specify social case management methodology also as a specific one for promoting:

- the integration of social services,
- the deinstitutionalization of care services within communities,
- ensuring the coordinated and needs-based provision of community services.

At the same time, it should be noted that when the methodology of social case management is introduced in organizations providing social services, it typically undergoes the process of institutionalization and is applied with its full conceptual “toolkit” only when certain conditions are met.

In order to study the institutionalization of social case management, it is first necessary to analyze the concept of *institutionalization*.

Institutionalization is a concept widely used in sociology. Sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman interpret institutionalization as the mutual recognition and typologization of habitual actions by actors within social relationships (Berger, Luckman, 1966). According to them, institutionalization emerges when:

1. habitual actions are formed within social relations,
2. these habitual actions are mutually recognized and accepted by the participants of those relations,
3. these actions form institutions or become part of existing institutions.

As the authors note, in the case of institutionalization it becomes clear that action X will be performed by actor Y (Berger, Luckman, 1966).

W. Richard Scott, complementing the interpretations of Berger and Luckman, identifies three key components of institutionalization:

1. **regulative component** (legal regulations, policies, formal procedures),
2. **normative component** (professional standards, ethical principles),
3. **cultural-cognitive component**, interpreted as the mutual recognition, understanding, legitimization of the practices, capacity-building, and actual application by key actors (Scott, 1995).

In our view, the formation of these components can also be interpreted as the **stages of institutionalization**, reflecting the step-by-step process through which a given practice becomes institutionalized within a system of relations.

Within the context of this study, institutionalization will be understood as a process through which social practices, roles, and norms are formalized, legitimized, acquire stable application, and become integrated into the systems of roles, norms, or legal regulations of existing organizations. This interpretation serves as the basis for examining the institutionalization of social case management in organizations operating in Armenia.

Research Methodology

Within the framework of this article, a sociological study was conducted in January–February 2026.

The need for this research stemmed from the fact that, although social case management has a relatively rich history of application in Armenian organizations providing social services, it has never been comprehensively studied. In particular, it remains unclear whether social case management has been institutionalized within these organizations or is still applied in a fragmented and non-uniform manner.

At the same time, it is evident that social case management in Armenia has its own specific characteristics, which are also at the center of this study.

Accordingly, the following research objectives were formulated:

1. to analyze the specific features of the application of social case management methodology in Armenia,
2. to examine the stages of institutionalization of social case management methodology in social service agencies of Armenia and determine the current stage of its institutionalization,
3. identify the factors hindering the institutionalization of social case management in Armenian social service agencies and outline key recommendations to overcome them.

The study employed qualitative research methods, specifically:

- focus group discussions with professionals applying social case management,
- in-depth (unstructured) interviews with experts.
- content analysis of the main documents related to social case management.

Particularly, those were the following documents:

- legal regulations on integrated social services, unified social service and social case management,
- professional principles and ethical norms defined in social case management guidelines,
- coherent researches and analysis that directly or indirectly refer to social case management.

Focus group discussions were conducted with social workers applying the social case management methodology, including those employed in state, community, and non-governmental organizations.

Expert interviews were conducted individually with:

- heads of organizations providing social services,
- program coordinators,
- and specialists in the field of social protection.

In total, the study included:

- 8 focus group discussions (38 social workers),
- 11 expert interviews. 6 documents.

14 participants of the focus group discussions presented state agencies, 12 local self-government bodies and the other 12 non-governmental organizations.

The focus group discussions used to analyze the daily activities of social case managers, their main functions, changes in conducting those functions during the recent years, reasons of those changes, main challenges for effective implementation of

social case management methodology and their vision on further development of social case management in Armenian social services.

Expert interviews were conducted with the policy developers, researchers and social service coordinators. With them we discussed the phases of institutionalization of social case management in the social service agencies of Armenia, peculiarities of social case management methodology, the main challenges in the processes of institutionalization and recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of those processes.

All interviews were conducted in a face to face manner and based on pre-developed questionnaires, Participants were informed in advance about the objectives, tasks, and ethical principles of the study and signed informed consent forms.

Analysis of Research Results

Based on the objectives of the research the results can be presented in the following topics:

1. stages of the introduction and institutionalization of social case management in Armenia,
2. characteristics of social case management new methodology defined in newly adopted regulations,
3. the level of institutionalization of social case management in Armenia, the factors that hinder the institutionalization
4. recommendations for ensuring further institutionalization of social case management in Armenian social services agencies.

1. Stages of Introduction and Institutionalization of Social Case Management in Armenia

Based on the content analysis of the coherent documents, as well as the results of expert interviews hereby we can define the main stages of social case management introduction and institutionalization in Armenia.

From 1990 to 2010

During this period, social services began to be introduced in Armenia, and the organizations that were to provide social services to different groups of the population (children, families, refugees, persons with disabilities, and others in difficult life situations) were established. During this period, the institute of social work was also introduced, and with the involvement of social workers in the mentioned organizations, cases of the application of social case management were recorded. However, this phase was characterized by spontaneous, uncoordinated applications of social case management practices, improper adherence to procedures, principles, and stages, and the specialists applying these practices had unclear understandings of social case management. In this phase, social case management practices were mainly applied by specialists from organizations representing the public sector.

From 2010 to 2021

This phase was marked by the establishment of the integrated social services system in Armenia. In 2010, the RA Government approved the concept of developing the

system of integrated social services. Within this concept the integrated social services were defined as provision of services in a coordinated and cooperative way¹.

The concept approved the Government's policy to integrate social services and to establish territorial centers of integrated (complex) social services (RA legal regulation "On approving the concept for organizing the process of providing integrated social services", 2010). In these, significant importance was given to social case management, emphasizing its role especially in working with complex cases involving multiple services.

During this phase, particularly in 2017, the position of social worker was also introduced in the local self-government system, contributing to the fact that social case management practices began to be applied also at the community level as well, in particular by social workers of municipalities, aimed at supporting individuals in difficult life situations in the community.

In this phase, the first programs for developing the capacities of specialists in the application of social case management methodology were also launched, the first guidelines were developed, and initiatives aimed at the systematic application of social case management in various organizations were implemented.

In this phase, legal acts related to social case management were also adopted. This became the starting phase of the institutionalization of social case management practices that had been customary and applied in a non-systematic manner.

At the same time, during this phase, problems were recorded that conditioned the need to move to the next phase. Particularly, there were problems in the processes of developing the integrated social services system; in fact, this system was not fully established. This resulted to the situation, when:

- in state organizations providing social services, the social case management methodology was not fully introduced, remained fragmented, being applied not in all cases where it was necessary to be applied, and being implemented not with the full set of tools with which it could be,
- social case management in state, public, and community organizations continued to be applied without a unified approach, with different toolkits and different forms,
- the absence of a clear distribution of roles among social workers of different organizations led to role confusion among specialists involved in the social case management process.

In addition, one of the problems recorded in this phase was that neither in legal acts nor in work practice was a clear distinction between social case management and other methods of social work, which led to the fact that specialists for quite a long time identified social case management as a social work, considering that by working with each case and carrying out social work, they were implementing social case management.

From 2021 to present

A new phase in the development of the social case management methodology started with the introduction of the Unified Social Service in Armenia.

¹ Government of RA, "On approving the concept for organizing the process of providing integrated social services", 2012.

In 2021, the Charter of the Unified Social Service was also approved, which stipulated that:

1. the provision of integrated social services should be ensured through social case management,
2. the functions of the Unified Social Service include the assessment of the needs of persons seeking or receiving support within the framework of social case management and the provision of necessary social services².

In this phase, particularly in 2025, legal and normative regulations were adopted by which the following were clarified:

- the cases when the social case management methodology can be applied, and when social workers must be guided by this methodology,
- the unified toolkit of social case management,
- the distribution of roles of specialists within the framework of social case management, according to which the main responsibility for social case management in the community lies with the social workers of state organizations, namely the territorial centers of the Unified Social Service; in cases of child protection, with social workers operating at the community level; and in residential care institutions, including penitentiary institutions, with the social workers of those institutions. Accordingly, social workers of all other organizations are assigned the functions of early identification and prevention, especially those operating at the local self-government system, as well as the provision of specialized services, which is mainly assigned to specialists from the nongovernmental sector within the framework of the support network³.

The research showed that the last mentioned clauses are also in the list of the main features of social case management new methodology.

2. The characteristics of social case management new methodology established in social service agencies of Armenia

Based on the results of the research we can also clearly define the main characteristics or features of Armenian social case management. Those are the followings.

- Risk-based application of social case management methodology

Social workers apply the methodology depending on the level of risk associated with the case. It is primarily used in cases of the medium or high risk levels. Risk assessment is conducted using standardized screening tools.

- Importance of support networks in social case management methodology

A key feature is the central role of support networks. Social cooperation between professionals and organizations is mainly organized within the framework of case management.

- Inclusion of informal networks

Another distinctive characteristic is the frequent involvement of informal networks (family members, community actors) due to limited availability of formal services.

- Emphasis on resources' and services' mapping

² Charter of Unified Social Services, 2021.

³ Order of the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs "On Social Case Management and Home Visit Methodology", 2025.

As there is a lack of social services in the communities of Armenia, one of the main peculiarities of social case management is the implementation of the methods for mapping and coordinating the existing ones. Mapping of resources and services is an essential component of social case management, although different organizations use different tools and formats for that

3. The level of institutionalization of social case management methodology in the social service agencies of Armenia

The research helped us to identify the level of institutionalization of social case management in Armenia. Based on the results, we can assume that social case management has not passed through the whole phases of the institutionalization. Though it has its regular component defined in the legal regulations, as well as normative component presented in the professional guidelines, the institutionalization is stopped in the phase of cultural and cognitive institutionalization. This can be justified by the fact that, as the results of the research showed, the social workers who should use or implement new methodology are not fully familiar with that, not always oriented how to act and in what situation, have problems while following the main regulations, especially the SOPs of the newly defined methodology.

This means, that though the institutionalization of social case management in the social service agencies of Armenia has through legal or normative regulations, haven't yet reached the stage of its full implementation and systematic execution.

4. Factors hindering institutionalization of social case management in Armenia

According to the results of the research we can define the factors that hinder the institutionalization process of social case management in Armenia. First, as was mentioned above not enough efforts have been invested in rising awareness and competencies of social workers for implementing the new methodology of social case management. Not all of them are familiar with new regulations, not all of them have experience in using it and not all efforts are succeeded.

Besides the research revealed the tendency of organizations to maintain local approaches to the application of social case management

Particularly, professionals operating at the state, community, and non-governmental levels continue, by inertia, to rely on previous practices and tools used prior to the adoption of standardized approaches.

This is especially obvious in non-governmental organizations, where social case management is being implemented based on their own principles and using the toolkits they have. According to the respondents from nongovernmental organizations, they rely on the existing practice, as they lack information, experience and clear vision on what are the reasons of the changes in the methodology of social case management and what are the main mechanisms of implementing newly confirmed approaches and generalized toolkits.

As the interviews with social case managers from state and community organizations showed, though they are well informed on the newly adopted regulations on social case management but they don't have clear vision on how to implement them. They follow those regulations but need time to learn and getting expertized in new social case management approaches.

Hence, based on the results of the research we can assume that the institutionalization of social case management in social service agencies of Armenia is hindered by the following factors:

- a lack of confidence in the effective implementation of new approaches,
- insufficient awareness,
- challenges in legitimizing newly approved and generalized methodology of social case management, as well as the legitimizing the role distributions between the main participants,
- weak social norms of collaborative work in the community level, etc.

The problems of institutionalization of social case management are by some other factors that also have their influence. Those are:

The need for digitalization and the introduction of modern toolkits

Currently, most processes are carried out in paper-based formats, which:

- reduces efficiency,
- complicates information exchange,
- limits timely and coordinated responses to the needs of beneficiaries.

The study indicates that digital tools are particularly needed for:

1. transfer of social cases from one professional to another or from one agency (community) to another,
2. secure and efficient exchange of case-related information,
3. effective implementation of service referrals.

Problems in the further development of the system of integrated social services in the communities of Armenia

Those are the problems caused by the fact that there are still issues related to the establishment of the integrated social services system, since the absence of vertical integration at the level of service organization and weak cooperation at the horizontal level condition the problems of institutionalization of social case management.

In addition, the network of social services in Armenian communities is not sufficient. Particularly, there are communities that do not have certain services or, if they do, they are not sufficient to meet the full needs of the community. Most organizations providing social services are concentrated in large cities, while in other settlements the coverage of services is very sparse. Moreover, due to weak coordination, services of the same nature, may be provided in the same region, creating overlaps, while some regions may remain without the possibility of having any service/program (Yarmaloyan, 2017).

Since the social case management methodology is applied in work with families with complex needs and has an important “mission” to ensure the systematic and coordinated provision of services necessary to meet those needs, the problems of the range and geographical distribution of services in social and other sectors make it difficult for social workers to carry out effective social case management.

Conclusions

1. The social case management is widely discussed in academic literature but lacks a unified definition. However, most interpretations emphasize:

- its role in providing coordinated services to individuals or families with complex needs or with a medium or high risk,
 - its importance in decentralization, community-based services, and deinstitutionalization processes.
2. Social case management is closely linked to social work and can be considered a methodology within it.
 3. Based on the analysis, the following generalized definition of social case management can be proposed:
Social case management is a social work methodology aimed at providing coordinated, needs-based services to individuals or families with complex needs or in a medium or a high risk, and ensuring their social inclusion, independent functioning, and self-sufficiency.
 4. The research showed that the social case management methodology has the following features in Armenia:
 - application in medium- and high-risk cases,
 - mandatory formation of support networks,
 - inclusion of beneficiaries' social environment in support networks and in social case management in general,
 - emphasis on mapping of social services and community resources,
 - organization of social cooperation at the community level mainly within the framework of social case management.
 - role division of the main participants of the social case management,
 - generalized SOPs and toolkits for using while implementing social case management by the social workers from different sectors.
 5. Although legal, procedural, and ethical frameworks are in place and have been adopted recently, challenges remain at the **cultural-cognitive level**, particularly dismiss the following components of institutionalization:
 - mutual recognition and legitimization of the methodology by the main stakeholders responsible to apply it,,
 - not being ready to adopt new and generalized approaches and willingness to keep the still existing procedures: The force of habit,
 - capacity development and digitalization needs,
 - further development of integrated social services system in the country.

Recommendations

Based on the factors that hinder the process of institutionalization of social case management in organizations providing social services in Armenia, the following recommendations can be proposed:

1. **Strengthen and institutionalize inter-agency and network-based collaboration mechanisms** among state, community, and on-governmental actors involved in social service delivery. This should include formalized coordination protocols, clearly defined communication channels, and regular inter-organizational case conferences to reduce fragmentation and ensure integrated service provision.
2. **Develop and sustain continuous, practice-oriented capacity-building systems** for social workers and related professionals engaged in social case

management. Training programs should move beyond theoretical instruction and emphasize applied learning, supervision, mentoring, and workplace-based skill development aligned with standardized methodologies and tools.

3. **Establish a structured system for documenting, systematizing, and disseminating best practices** in social case management. This may include national or institutional repositories, practice manuals, and thematic case study collections aimed at strengthening methodological consistency and promoting evidence-informed practice.
4. **Accelerate the digital transformation of social case management systems** through the development of integrated electronic platforms. Such systems should support secure case transfer, standardized data collection, real-time information sharing, and inter-agency referrals while ensuring confidentiality and data protection standards.
5. **Harmonize and further standardize methodological tools and procedural frameworks** across all implementing institutions to reduce variability in practice. Particular attention should be given to ensuring consistent use of assessment tools, case documentation formats, and intervention protocols.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethics Statement

The author confirms that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.