


## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INTEGRATED SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEM IN ARMENIA

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

PhD in Sociology, Assistant Professor of the Department of Social Work and Social Technologies, Yerevan State University. Email: [yevginevardanyan@ysu.am](mailto:yevginevardanyan@ysu.am)

**Abstract.** There are many approaches in the literature that describe the integrated social services concept and analyze the processes, mechanisms and purposes of integrating social and/or other multispectral services. The models of integration are also the object of some analysis, but still there is a lack of description of the services' integration models, and a necessity in clearly defining and describing them. The article comes to fulfill this gap, and also to analyze the experience of the Republic of Armenia in integrating social services. The reform lasted almost 10 years, and still the country struggles with the difficulties in ensuring the effectiveness and accessibility of those services. Hence, the article is aimed at revealing the main problems and omissions that have occurred and still exist within the frame of the reform. For achieving the main goals proposed for the article, the following research methods have been used: documentary analysis, focus group discussions, and participant observation. The main results of the research make it obvious that Armenia passed two main phases for integrating social services. During the first phase, the country was able to ensure only the co-location of the state agencies that were responsible for the provision of social services, locating them in one building with one reception, but no more. For fulfilling the reform, the second phase of integration was launched in 2021, and during that phase the integration was performed with the usage of the principles of structural and functional changes as a model of integrating social service. Meanwhile, for making the whole system work, Armenia needs to go forward and achieve the integration of the procedures, protocols and databases of the services, as well as ensuring the change in the cultural and organizational norms of the newly established system, enhancing cooperation and partnership between the staff of integrated services. This will certify the implementation of another model of integrating social services that is a full integration model.

**Key words:** *integrated social services, models of integrating social services, case management, structural and functional integration*

### **Integration of services and models of integrating social services**

The integration of social services is usually defined as a range of approaches or methods for enhancing greater coordination and effectiveness between services. It is mainly referred to joint procedures and integrated working practices and norms (Munday, 2007). Integration of social services also considers joint objective setting and decision-making, as well as shared commitment between actors (Scoppetta, Sandu, 2022).



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Various forms of service integration are outlined in the literature, depending on sectors, target groups, governance, objectives and the level of integration between two or more public services. Hence, some approaches assure that integration can be achieved by having a single accountable agency responsible for commissioning services (Hutson, 2004). Others emphasize improving cooperation and enhancing co-working processes between professionals from different sectors who work with the same client (Montero, Duijn, Zonneveld, Minkman, Nies, 2016). Within this approach the term “integration of the services” is used as a synonym for coordination, cooperation, partnership and collaboration, inter-professional or joint working (Munday, 2007).

Another approach emphasizes the role of case management and multidisciplinary teams in integrating social services. Within this approach the importance of the communication and information channels is emphasized for providing clarities about roles and responsibilities and facilitating cooperative work (Montero, Duijn, Zonneveld, Minkman, Nies, 2016).

According to Brian Munday, the services can be integrated either vertically or horizontally. Vertical integration considers the integration of the services at national, regional and local levels. Meanwhile, horizontal integration refers to “bringing together” different services at the same level, for instance, social and health services for children and their families or for the elderly in the community. The horizontal integration can also be organized by integrating wider services, for example, health and social services at the community level envisaged for all groups of population, based on the need of services they have.

The integration of services can also be implemented for the services of the same sector, for instance, social services for children and families, as well as for the services from different sectors, like health and social services, or educational and social services. The international practice shows that the integration mostly refers to health and social services, social and employment services, especially at the local level (Montero, Duijn, Zonneveld, Minkman, Nies, 2016).

The integration of social services can envisage also mixed economies integration. This means that the social services integration can be implemented by integrating public, private non-profit and commercial services.

Based on the results of the research, being conducted for analyzing the European experience in integrating social care and support, the European Social Network has identified the following categories or models of integration:

1. no specific policy or legislation on service integration,
2. policies promoting coordination or resource transfer,
3. policies promoting full structural integration,
4. combination of these three (European Social Network, “Integrated social services in Europe”, 2016).

Co-location as an integration is another model that is suggested in the professional literature for fulfilling the integration of services. This model considers a single point of entry and co-location (Hutson 2004) and mainly refers to the integration of the agencies that provide social services. In many cases integration is not limited only to placing the agencies in one building or creating for them one same location. Effective integration also considers structural and functional changes, which is another model of integration of services. The structural and functional model of integration refers to bringing together

staff and resources in one single organization under a single unified structure. In this model the services that are integrated are provided by the single organization with one entry, integrated procedures, and the same administration and budgeting.

Analyzing the main theoretical approaches to social services' integration, we can assume that the integration of social services can be undertaken by:

1. Integrating agencies or organizations that are responsible for providing services, and/or
2. Integrating services provided by different organizations or entities.

While integration of agencies or organizations may refer to co-location, as well as to structural and functional changes or implementation of the structural-functional model of integration, the enhancement of cooperation or co-working envisages the integration of social services for different groups of the population.

For full integration of social services, it is necessary to implement both models of integration, ensuring integration of both agencies and organizations, as well as the integration of the services provided by them.

Hence, we can assume, that integration models can be distinguished from **completely fragmented ones**, which means keeping agencies or organizations as independent entities that maintain their own procedures, coordination and bureaucracy, but with the style or culture of co-working and partnership, to **locating services in one building** with a one-stop-services provision approach, as well as **fully integrating services systems** by integrating both the agencies, and the services they provide. The last is also defined as a stage of integration when the "whole system works as one".

For achieving full integration, the process should pass the following phases:

- ❖ integration within the same entity with one-stop services provision: all agencies that provide services we intend to integrate should be located in the same building, so the service user only needs to go to one place for support,
- ❖ structural changes or structural reorganization,
- ❖ functional changes or integration of the service planning, delivering, monitoring processes and the development of the joint procedures,
- ❖ formal mechanisms for partnership based on the cooperation and co-working norms,
- ❖ integration of the coordination and management processes, single administration and decision-making authority, with other aspects of the service planning and management being integrated as well.
- ❖ investment of the case management methodology in assessing, planning, delivering and coordinating personal social services,
- ❖ integration of the resources,
- ❖ collaborative information/consultation exchange platform for professionals: a professional platform with an emphasis on sharing knowledge and information.

Hence, based on the studies of the theoretical approaches that describe or interpret the integration of social services, we suggest that the abovementioned steps or phases are necessary for ensuring the establishment of the fully integrated system. These phases can independently be interpreted as the different models of integration as well. But they are necessary for achieving the full integration model.

### **The Experience of Armenia in Integrating Social Services**

Since 2021, Armenia has adopted the policy of integrating social services. Before

this, those services were provided by 4 separately functioning and weakly cooperating state agencies. The Government of the RA, fixing the need to respond to societal challenges and making the assistance to vulnerable families' complex, more effective and reachable, chose the way of integrating the main social services for vulnerable families. Thereon, the central initiative had been implemented at the local level, and therefore governmental action was required at both central and local levels. After that, the reform of the development of integrated social services system in Armenia passed many stages and processes and finally in 2021 the reform entered its crucial stage which brought about the comprehensive integration of the social services in the employment and social security sectors.

### **Research methodology**

For analyzing the experience of Armenia in developing an integrated social services system and for revealing the main problems still existing in that system, the following research methods have been applied:

1. Documentary analysis, particularly:
  - *Content analysis of the main documents related to the reform and integrated social services. Those documents were current legal regulations and strategies adopted by the RA government in the social protection sphere<sup>1</sup>,*
  - *Secondary analysis of the research and reports implemented for studying the integrated social services system in Armenia<sup>2</sup>.*
2. Focus group discussion with the experts involved in the reform of integrating social services in Armenia. Those experts presented different organizations, starting with the main one responsible for the reform body, that is, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, as well as non-governmental organizations that deal with or work with the integrated social service, and the organizations that have conducted research for analyzing the integration processes. Within the research 3 focus-group discussions have been organized, with more than 15 participants.
3. Participant observation method has also been implemented by the author, who was being involved as an expert in the reform of the integrated social services system in Armenia during the second phase of the reform.

### **The main stages of the integrated social services development in Armenia**

Armenia, like other countries, faced the necessity of reforming the social services' delivery processes during the last decades. The main aim of those reforms was to address more effectively the complex social needs of different groups of population. For the main mechanism of realizing that aim has been chosen: the integration of employment, social security (pensions and social security benefits), social welfare services for families and

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<sup>1</sup> Decision of the Government of RA (2012) *On the approval of the project on the program for introducing the integrated social services system in Armenia* N 952-Ն, 26.07.2023, Decision of the Government of RA (2015) *On multisector cooperation* N 1044, 10.09.2015, RA Government, Integrated social services system investment trial program basic legal acts Assembly, 2013, Order of the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs (2021) *On the acceptance of the charter of the unified social services*, 37-Լ, 17.03.2021., RA Law (2014) *On Social Assistance*, 05.12.2014. RA Law (2016) *On Local Self Governance*, 16.12.2016.

<sup>2</sup> Social Economic situation in Armenia in 2023, Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia, January-February, 2023. Social Economic situation in Armenia in 2023, Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia, January-November, 2022. UNICEF (2021) *Core diagnostic of the social protection system and the impact of COVID-19 on households in Armenia*. <https://www.unicef.org/armenia/media/9301/file>

social-medical services for people with disabilities.

Our research showed that the establishment of an integrated social services system in Armenia passed two main stages.

*First started in 2012.* That was the time, when the Government of Armenia adopted a new strategy of integrating main state social services. While serving the inhabitants of the same territory they functioned separately, with weak links and few linkages or occasions of cooperation (Antonyan 2014). Moreover, they were located in different places, making the possibilities of provision of the joint services more difficult. As it was mentioned in the strategy of the establishment of integrated social services (RA Government 2012) this situation brought about the low effectiveness of social services, the predominance of the administrative work and activities over real social services' provision that should be directed towards the satisfaction of the needs of the beneficiaries. Besides, before the establishment of a new approach in the social services system, the social work and social case management methodologies, as well as the complex assessment of the beneficiaries' needs were not enough emphasized (Minasyan 2013). Those were the main reasons for the RA Government starting the reform of existing social services integration and establishment of the new centers for provision of the mentioned.

Within this reform, in more than 16 communities of Armenia, new territorial centers of integrated social services were established, and it was planned to have this kind of service in all communities of Armenia during the upcoming period. The new approach considered:

1. locating the main state social agencies in one center and construction of proper buildings,
2. adoption of the one-stop shop principle by creating the general, joint reception for all social services,
3. investment of the social case management methodology as the key element for coordinating the provision of social services to beneficiaries,
4. integration of the databases and informative systems of the social services (Minasyan 2013).

But the analysis soon showed that the first stage of the reform directed towards the development of the integrated social services' system was not able to achieve all main objectives defined by the Government. Particularly, during the first stage of the reform that lasted from 2012 to 2021:

- not all agencies were integrated,
- there was no real integration between 4 social agencies, and they continued to act as separately functioning organizations, without any joint procedures or shared protocols,
- the only integration referred to locating those agencies in one building, particularly in the territorial centers of integrated social services,
- though one of the important achievements of that phase of integration was the creation of joint receptions in territorial centers, the functional division between the staff of the reception remained even long after the establishment of the territorial centers,
- the practice of separate functioning remained not only in the territorial level, but also on the policy-making and social services coordination levels,

- the integration of the databases and informative systems was not committed, though the use of information exchange platforms could have an important influence on the comprehensive integration of the services.

There were many reasons and justifications for not fulfilling the whole scope of the reform, which are not in the focus of our analysis. The most important fact is that the reform has stopped in the “middle” of integration and considered only physical relocation and one entity establishment for provision of main social services to the population. It has not gone through all the steps of the integration for fulfilling the comprehensive integration which was possible by integrating not only organizations but also social services they provide.

Hence, based on analysis of the results for the first stage of social services’ integration we can assume, that in the first phase the integration was linked to the co-location of the state agencies with the establishment of the one-stop service with a single location and one entry point. But not more.

The first stage of the reform has not been continued and has not made the whole system work.

This situation continued to remain until the new Government of RA made a decision to go forward with the integration of social services and complete the reform that didn’t reach its final stage during the last phase. That was the time when the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of social services integration was announced. After that on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2021, the Government of RA adopted a new decision on the new “Charter of the Unified Social Services”. Based on that decision the new system of integrated social services was established. It was renamed and called the “unified social services system”. The main goal of that phase is announced to be the full integration with integrating both agencies and services provided by them.

According to the new stage of the reform, 49 territorial centers of unified social services have been formed for providing social services in an integrated manner in the whole territory of the country.

The main changes in the structure of those centers refer to the creation of the new divisions or departments. In contrast to the previously existing territorial centers, which have had 4 different divisions for providing 4 different services without real emphasis on integration, the new centers have only 2 structural divisions: *reception and the division of social work and employment services*. This fact comes to prove that the integration on the structural level has been implemented. Moreover, the reception is responsible for receiving all kinds of social protection applications. And the division of social work and employment services is responsible for providing social assistance and employment-integrated services with close cooperation between the specialists. By this, functional changes have been launched as well.

The new phase of the current reform also refers to the integration of coordination processes. For that purpose, an agency has been established. It is the head office of unified social services that is responsible for coordinating the work and activities of 49 territorial centers.

Before this stage of the reform, main state social services had been coordinated by separate agencies. After the new stage of the reform, the coordination and administration of the territorial centers is conducted by the same entity.

The new reform has also allowed for the clarification of the functions of

the ministry and the administration body of social services. Within the reform it has been clearly defined that the functions of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of Armenia are as follows:

1. development of the social policy of the country,
2. development of the legal regulations and strategies,
3. creation of the standards for the social services and social protection programs, etc.

The unified social services with administration and territorial centers have their main functions in planning, providing, monitoring and evaluating the integrated social services (RA Government, 2021).

The new stage of the reform differs from the previous one also with the fact that the integration is based on social case management methodology. The social workers of the previous social assistance services are functioning as case managers, ensuring the teamwork and coordination of services' delivery to the clients by other specialists or partner organizations.

Case management is important in delivering integrated support (European Social Network, "Integrated social services in Europe", 2016). Armenia has adopted this approach as well.

Taking into account the main results of the analysis of the reform on integrating social services in Armenia, we can assume that our experience is based also on the main peculiarities of the vertical and horizontal models of integrating services, as the reform considers:

1. Integrating the decision-making, coordinating and services' delivery procedures from the "up to bottom" (decision-making body: as the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, administrative body: as the head office of unified social services, and territorial centers as providers of the services),
2. Integration of main social services is envisaged for the vulnerable families at the local level,
3. Integrating the agencies, responsible for the provision of those services.

The Armenian experience of integrating social services is not touching only the mixed-economy integration model, as it refers to integrating only state or governmental services, excluding from the integrating processes non-governmental or private organizations. Still, the model considers the "integration" of those services based on the close cooperation and partnership with them, also within the case management methodology.

#### **The problems of the new stage of the integrated social services system establishment**

Though the second stage of integrating social services in Armenia has recorded very important changes and achievements, which mainly refer to the structural and functional changes and integration of coordination processes, there is still a need for many other changes to make the whole integrated system work.

The integration of social services includes mechanisms and procedures that streamline the establishment and use of information exchange platforms for ensuring effective cooperation and teamwork.

*One of the main obstacles to the new stage of the integration of social services in Armenia is the absence of the shared platforms and databases.* The social services that have been integrated still have the separate databases they have had before the integration and have no real and effective information-sharing mechanisms.

*It might be difficult to form an effective inter-professional team without having social services planning and delivering joint or shared protocols. This is an important perspective that still should be achieved during the second phase of the integration of social service in Armenia. The lack of protocols and not fully invested integration approaches in every phase of the social services planning and delivering procedures, as well as in case management, cause the difficulties in full integration of the services.*

*As we can assume, though the roles and responsibilities of the staff members of the integrated social services are clearly defined and presented in the job descriptions of the specialists, the mechanisms of their cooperation and teamwork are still not clear and need to be defined.*

Within the integrating approaches, it is emphasized that besides focusing on structural, functional, coordination and administrative arrangements, many difficulties in inter-professional teamwork can be linked to existing organizational cultures and social norms. Hence, the collaboration does not always run effectively due to a lack of knowledge about one another or a lack of mutual understanding or knowledge about one another. This is the situation that occurs in the Armenian practice of social services' integration.

Based on the mentioned we can assume that *one of the main obstacles to the further development of the integrated social services system in Armenia remains the old or "used to" practices of the staff members within the newly established unified social services system.* In some cases, specialists of previous services simply continue their traditional way of working in silos, rather than through collaboration and teamwork. These obstacles and issues still affect the process of continued development of the integrated social services system in Armenia and cause difficulties in achieving the full integration of the services.

### **Summary**

Considering the main results of the theoretical and empirical studies, we can summarize the article with the following postulates.

1. The integration of services is a very important reform in modern societies, as it helps to address the multidimensional risks and problems in a complex and cooperative way.
2. Based on the international practice of the integration of services, we can determine 3 main models for that, which describe the integration from fragmented work to full integration. Those are:
  - separate organizations with strong partnerships and co-working while providing the services that are considered to be integrated. This means that integration is focused on the processes and on the work with the clients,
  - co-location of the services while maintaining the structural and functional, in some cases also coordination and budgeting independence of the services,
  - full integration by integrating both the agencies, and the services they provide.

Full integration of social services also considers:

- ✓ integration of the coordination and management processes,
- ✓ integration of the service planning, delivering, monitoring processes and the development of the joint procedures
- ✓ integration of the resources and budgeting,



- ✓ investment of the case management methodology in assessing, planning, delivering and coordinating personal social services,
- ✓ multidisciplinary teams and inter-professional teamwork,
- ✓ shared toolkits and plans,
- ✓ collaborative information/consultation exchange platform for professionals: a professional platform with an emphasis on sharing knowledge and information.

Based on the results of the analysis of the practice of Armenia in establishing the integrated services system, we can assume, that during the first phase of the integration it was not the full integration of the services that was initially planned, but was limited only to the relocation of existing state agencies in the same building, with a general reception for all services.

The second phase of the reform went deeper into ensuring integration and brought to the structural, functional, coordination integration. Meanwhile, to ensure the whole system works, we need to go on with the reform and continue the establishment of the integrated social services system by:

- ✓ development of the collaborative information exchange platforms,
- ✓ development of the integrated procedures and toolkits,
- ✓ enhancement of the new organizational norms creation that values cooperation and integration more than acting based on the previous norms and with the old practices. This might be achieved via learning, leadership and innovations that make the work and activities easier to conduct within the integrated social services.

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### **Conflict of Interests**

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

### **Ethical Standards**

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.