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SOCIAL POLICY
OF ARMENIA IN CONDITIONS OF INSTABILITY

In recent decades, Armenia has faced serious challenges related to population displacement, limited state resources, and growing dependence on international aid. The authors draw attention to the inefficiency of social protection and support mechanisms and highlight the need for strategic approaches to social risk management. The article addresses key issues within the Armenian social protection system: its reactive nature, lack of proactive measures, and insufficient integration of professional social work. The authors emphasize the existing gap between the strategic goals outlined in policy documents and the actual mechanisms used in practice. The lack of clear protocols and preparedness for emergencies creates additional difficulties during humanitarian crises, while the use of traditional resource distribution mechanisms only partially meets the needs of displaced persons and low-income populations. The article discusses the problem of policy fragmentation, where macroeconomic and social policies are not coordinated. As a result, economic growth does not always translate into poverty reduction and improved living conditions for the most vulnerable groups. The authors stress the importance of developing new approaches aimed at empowering citizens and implementing programs that promote the activation

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of low-income populations, including linking social benefits to employment. The paper makes a number of recommendations for improving social policy, emphasizing the need for closer coordination between different sectors, strengthening the role of social work, and developing strategies aimed at risk prevention and adapting the system to changing conditions. The article contributes to the discussion on social welfare in conditions of instability.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020 and subsequent events have fundamentally altered the balance of power in the South Caucasus region, laying the groundwork for confrontation and multifaceted competition for regional influence among key regional actors (Hayrapetyan 2022: 92–93; Poghosyan 2022: 46–47; Yemelianova 2023: 1356–1357; Barri et al. 2021: 8–24). In this context, issues of social assistance in the form of humanitarian aid have become particularly relevant (Levaillant 2024). The impact of the conflict on civilians is devastating, and the need for assistance is often acute. However, the delivery of humanitarian aid in conflict zones faces numerous challenges, including security threats, limited access, and political and logistical barriers (Minear, Weiss 2023). The global political situation remains unfavorable for humanitarian action. Challenges arise from ongoing violations of international humanitarian law (such as the protection of civilians in conflict zones), breaches of the principles of neutrality (when aid is provided to only one side of the conflict), and breaches of the principles of impartiality (when aid should be provided regardless of which side a person is on). These violations pose a threat to humanitarian operations, complicating their implementation and security (Development Initiative 2020).

As a participant in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Armenia receives significant aid from the European Union and the United States (Beato 2024). However, this aid often results in an imbalance between regular social programs[1] and emergency response programs[2]. In addition, emergency aid proves

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[1] The regular social programs refer to any social protection measure implemented by the Government of RA for the population of the country under ordinary conditions. Specifically, these refer to pension, social benefits, employment support programmes, etc.

[2] In this context, emergency response programs refer to any measures applied by the government and non-governmental agencies under the coordination of the government to address the needs of forcibly displaced people from NK, specifically the humanitarian aid programmes, which were providing food, hygienic items, housing goods, etc., as well as unconditional cash assistance program for the displaced people.

insufficient to provide effective support. Thus, despite the increase in international aid, it does not always meet the country's needs and creates challenges in coordinating different aid programs.

The aim of this article is to review the social support measures implemented in Armenia in the context of the military conflict, focusing on the main stages and directions of the development of the social security and assistance systems.

Social policy transition in post-soviet Armenia: challenges and reforms

After gaining independence in 1991, Armenia remained under the influence of the Soviet social welfare system, which was considered one of the best among authoritarian welfare states[1]. It was based on the compulsory redistribution of labor and resources, with the authoritarian state acting as the main provider of social services to citizens. This sphere aimed to ensure protection against occupational accidents, disability, sickness, and the loss of a breadwinner. It covered both the macro-social level, guaranteeing the right to work, free education, and free healthcare, and the micro-social level, redistributing resources between different social groups to maintain social equality (Aidukaite 2004). Following Armenia's independence, not only political but also significant social changes took place, creating new challenges that were very different in nature and scope. Changes were made to Armenia's social welfare regulatory framework (1990s–2000s), but even after these changes, the sector remained fragmented and inadequate to the new realities. Moreover, due to institutional inertia (Aksom 2022), Armenia retained many elements of the former social welfare sphere, which made it ineffective in the context of the new market economy (Government of RA 2003: 18–20). As a newly independent country, Armenia faced the negative consequences of events such as the Spitak earthquake in 1988 (Schott, Kalatas 2014), the energy blockade in the early 1990s, and the first Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 1991–1994 (De Waal 2003: 74; Miller, Miller 2003). Given these events, and the fact that the Soviet social welfare system was highly resource intensive, Armenia began to experience a significant shortage of resources to ensure sustainable development (Jomardian 2019: 27–29; Yarmaloyan 2017).

The main challenge for the new social welfare system was the uncontrolled rise in poverty levels among the population and the sharp increase in unemployment. By 1996, the poverty rate had reached 54.5% (compared to less than 20% during the Soviet period), more than 600000 jobs had been lost, and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) had shrunk by more than half (Government of RA 2003: 19–21). Since 1991, various government social programs aimed at reducing poverty and improving the living conditions of citizens had been implemented, but they had limited resources and were primarily redistributive in nature. This was particularly

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[1] China is also an example of an authoritarian welfare state (She 2021).

true of the distribution of humanitarian aid in the form of in-kind assistance or food vouchers. In 1993, a new social assistance system, known as 'Paros'[1], was created with the goal of targeting the most vulnerable segments of the population (Government of RA 1993). Assistance included direct cash transfers, subsidies for utilities and transport, and support for healthcare. However, despite these efforts, poverty remained a serious problem, as the assistance provided did not adequately address the real needs of the population.

A little later in 1999, a more structured approach, known as the Family benefit system based on means-testing[2] was applied, which helped the country to emerge from the crisis and mitigate the negative effects of extreme poverty, and continued after 2004–2005, when the socio-economic situation in the country improved significantly. Due to limited resources, the recipients of social assistance continued to be the most vulnerable groups of the population, namely people with disabilities, the homeless, single mothers, elderly people living alone, and large families.

Over the next decade, despite slow economic growth, Armenia attempted to improve the efficiency of its social policies, but faced a serious dilemma. On the one hand, the implementation of traditional mechanisms, such as insurance and proportional redistribution of social responsibility (e. g. in the pension system), was hampered by a lack of resources. On the other hand, alternative approaches to developing and regulating self-help in traditional and transforming societies, which could have replaced the paternalistic Soviet system, were only partially implemented and were not integrated into the overall system. As a result, social policy was focused on addressing the consequences of social problems rather than their causes, making it reactive, i.e. responding only to existing problems without preventing them.

Since the 2010s, discussions have begun on changing the priorities of social policy and social protection programs, which were reflected in two key strategic government documents: the Sustainable Development Program (Government of RA 2008) and the Development Prospects Program (Government of RA 2014). Both programs emphasize the need to integrate social and economic policies, focusing on expanding socio-economic rights and opportunities, supporting employment, and highlighting human capital development as a key strategic aspect (Government of RA 2008: 33–35; Government of RA 2014: 16–18). During this period, a new pension system based on an insurance mechanism was introduced (Law of RA On Cumulative Pension 2010). Changes were also made to the laws on state social benefits (Law of RA On State Social Benefits 2013a), employment (Law of RA… 2013b), and social support (Law of RA On Social Support 2014). However, the main problem, i.e. the unconditional nature of state

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[1] The system was publicly known as 'Paros,' but 'Paros' was the name of a computer program that calculated the level of family vulnerability based on a built-in formula.

[2] The government applied a means-testing approach for provision of social benefits to the poor population, which means that a formula for measuring the income and vulnerability of the people has been conducted in order to decide who gets cash assistance (state social benefits) from the government.

benefits and their separation from state employment programs remained unresolved. Thus, although the social welfare system made progress in terms of the legal framework and established guidelines for inter-agency cooperation (Government of RA 2015), it was still focused on the most vulnerable groups, limiting its potential in the area of human capital development (Yarmaloyan 2017: 23–24). According to a number of analyses conducted by different agencies, Armenia's social protection system includes many programs aimed at addressing most of the social risks faced by the population, but the coverage of most programs and care services remains limited, and the level of cash transfers is generally below the poverty line (EDRC 2016: 19, UNICEF 2020: 11).

After the 2018 revolution[1], the government decided to change its approach to social policy, in order to make it more effective. Instead of the previous paternalistic system, where the state provided assistance without expecting citizens to actively participate in improving their own situation, measures were proposed to expand the economic opportunities for poor families. Assistance was to be provided not only in the form of benefits but also through programs that would enable people to improve their economic situation independently. These ideas were reflected in the Strategic Program for 2021–2026, which emphasized economic activation and minimum social guarantees (Government of RA 2021: 53–54). In practice, however, these changes were not implemented on time. Instead, more traditional methods of resource distribution, such as benefits and material assistance, were used.

Armenia's social policy faced additional challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 war with Azerbaijan. These events worsened the situation of a significant part of the population, especially those in crisis situations: displaced persons, families that lost their breadwinners, war veterans with disabilities, and their families. As a result, the priority of social policy shifted towards providing humanitarian aid and responding to crisis situations (Government of RA 2020). The main problem was the lack of up-to-date data needed for effective planning and resource allocation. In order to provide appropriate assistance, it became crucial to quickly gather and analyze information to better understand who needed help and how to provide it. In recent years, the high-risk situation in the country has demonstrated that there are no simple or standard solutions to these challenges.

The strategic priority of integrating social and economic policies as an effective tool for ensuring the well-being of the population was not mer; moreover, due to emergencies, the government had to cut off budget allocations for employment support and redirect them to humanitarian objectives, mainly in the form of cash transfers. Instead, due to emergencies, budgetary resources that should have

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[1] The power transition in Armenia in Spring 2018, known as the Velvet Revolution, which began with protests in April 2018 initiated by a group of about thirty opposition and civil society activists (led by Nikole Pashinyan) and ignited a national civil-disobedience campaign that forced Armenia's Prime-minister (former president) Serzh Sarkisian's government to resign on April 23-a mere six days after his election to the premiership.

supported employment programs were cut and redirected to humanitarian assistance, mainly in the form of cash transfers. At the same time, social and economic policies have continued to develop separately, without proper coordination. The World Bank analysis shows that recent economic growth in Armenia has not translated tino job creation (World Bank 2024: 3). This suggests that economic growth has not been effective enough to address the problem of poverty, even though job creation is one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty.

Proponents of the empowerment approach (Yi 2015: 9, Perkins 1995) argue that it is a more effective way of tackling poverty and inequality than the traditional welfare system, which focuses on income redistribution. This approach emphasizes creating the conditions for people to be self-reliant and reducing their dependency on government assistance. However, critics (Andersen, Larsen 2024: 130–131) point out that such policies can be overly strict and coercive, and may not always take into account people's actual capacities. In addition, they do not guarantee that individuals will achieve self-sufficiency. Despite these debates, activation policies (promoting employment and reducing benefit dependence) have become a key element of welfare state reforms in Europe (Niyadurupola, Esposito 202: 591–592) and are likely to continue to play an important role in the coming years.

In Armenia, the implementation of such an approach faces several challenges. The difficulties lie not only in the high cost of introducing these measures but also in the public's expectations of the state and the psychological barriers associated with the paternalistic model, where people have become accustomed to relying on government assistance. Changing public perception and reducing reliance on paternalistic social policies requires a comprehensive approach that includes educational initiatives, effective communication, community support, policy change, and the promotion of positive role models (Leoni 2016). However, in the context of current humanitarian challenges, such as the pandemic and war, activating poor populations becomes a more difficult task. Conflicting and fragmented approaches to social policy complicate the smooth development of the social protection system. Policymakers try to follow strategic plans, but they are in no hurry to translate these changes into everyday practice.

Another issue relates to the practice of social work and the need to professionalize social services in the country. The ineffective integration of social work into the social protection system led to a situation where the solutions and models implemented were not always based on real needs and were not individualised. This, in turn, resulted in more negative consequences than could have been mitigated by the proper application of social work measures (Khachatryan 2017: 18–20). Despite the establishment of key components of the social work institution – such as education, social services, and professional associations – since the country's independence, the state has failed to fully utilize the potential of the profession (Antonyan 2017: 7–8). The main reason for this was the vague definition of social work and the requirements for entering the profession, as

outlined in national legislation (Law of RA On Social Support 2014). These limitations hindered the full integration of social work values and approaches into the social protection system. Both limited resources and an insufficient number of social workers have further exacerbated the challenges, especially in the later stages of addressing the situation of population displacement.

Limited social protection capacity in humanitarian crises

Despite the government's rhetoric and the adoption of new laws, the experience of receiving organizing response to the needs of displaced people during the 44-day war in Nagorno Karabakh[1] has shown that the capacity of key state-funded programs was severely constrained by the military conflict and the influx of displaced persons., As a result, there remains a significant gap at the political level between official statements and the actual implementation of assistance programs.

Institutional constraints on governance remain a key challenge for Armenia. According to the World Bank, 'the institutional framework for planning, monitoring, and evaluation is neither clear nor comprehensive, and strategic planning is weak' (World Bank 2024: 5). The main reasons for these difficulties are as follows.

First, politicians are often insufficiently motivated to make decisions based on social values. Instead, they may seek personal benefits such as increased power, enhanced status, and improved chances of re-election or financial gain. As a result, attention is given to social issues that bring political benefits (Walgrave et al. 2018: 548–549, Antonyan 2017: 7).

Second, the government bureaucracy, which is disconnected from real social issues, often creates obstacles to the development of systematic and rational policies. It is difficult to involve all stakeholders and experts in the decision-making process because of their competing interests. This leads to the avoidance of direct solutions, further exacerbating the problem (Pascoe et. al. 2022: 520–521).

In 2020, just before the war, UNICEF conducted an analysis of the national social protection system and found that it was not prepared for shocks and risks. The main conclusions were based on the fact that the system did not include protocols for action in emergencies. The system was found to be reactive, with limited capacity for prevention or early intervention. In addition, disaster risk reduction policies and social protection were not integrated and operated in parallel, creating challenges at the legislative level and in the implementation of measures to mitigate the effects of natural disasters or crises (UNICEF 2020).

The report highlights that Armenia is in a high-risk zone for natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, and hailstorms, as well as other socio-economic

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[1] 44-day war or Second Nagorno-Karabakh war, which was unleashed by Azerbaijan against Nagorno-Karabakh on September 27, 2020, and lasted for 44 days. During the war, more than 98,000 civilians from Nagorno-Karabakh were displaced and resettled in Armenia.

shocks due to high vulnerability and insufficient risk management capacity, including the limitations of the social protection system. This situation poses a particular threat to the most vulnerable segments of the population, who may be left without support in times of crises. It was noted that the implementation of effective policies, aimed at reducing vulnerability and poverty, supporting human capital through healthcare, education, and social protection systems, as well as improving the demographic situation through comprehensive family-oriented policies, is more important than ever. To achieve maximum impact, such policies need to be based on reliable data, backed by significant financial investment and supported by strong intersectoral coordination at all stages of the human life cycle (UNICEF 2020: 8).

The war in Nagorno-Karabakh has significantly exacerbated Armenia's social protection challenges. As a result of the military actions, more than 11 000 families were affected, and more than 90,000 people were forced to leave their homes in Artsakh. After the 44-day war, more than 37 000 people who had lost their homes (as their settlements remained under Azerbaijani control), became refugees, and were resettled in Armenia (Helsinki Citizens' Assembly of Vandzor, Fact-finding Report 2022). They all needed urgent assistance. At the same time, there was a need to balance new assistance programs for displaced persons with existing support measures for low-income populations. The third major challenge for the social protection system was the development of long-term support programs for displaced persons. At that time, however, Armenia did not have sufficient financial, temporary, or housing resources to address these issues (World Bank 2024: 56–57), and international support was very limited.

Armenia's vulnerability to instability, conflict, and economic shocks remains a major challenge for the country. This vulnerability has been exacerbated by the deep and widespread sense of insecurity among the population following the events of 2020, in particular the forced displacement of 120 000 Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) in September 2023. Despite certain similarities, these two events differed significantly in terms of their scale and the responses required. Following the 44-day war and the subsequent population displacement in 2020, short-term humanitarian programs were implemented, focusing on the provision of temporary shelter, food, clothing, and other essentials. The number of families requiring long-term assistance was relatively small. In contrast, the mass displacement in 2023 required a more comprehensive approach. It was necessary to combine short-term relief efforts with long-term strategies to ensure comprehensive humanitarian support and sustainable assistance for the displaced.

Given the current humanitarian situation, it has become much more difficult to focus on activating poor families in the country and using the social protection system as a mechanism to expand their opportunities. It is clear that such contradictory and fragmented approaches are unlikely to contribute to the effective development of the social protection system. However, while policy-

makers are keen to adhere to rational strategies at the planning level, they are in no hurry to translate these strategies into common social policy practice.

Undervalued resources and gaps

Although some issues have been addressed, neither strategic nor operational approaches to tackling them have been implemented in local social policy. The main reason for this is the geopolitical situation of the country, which makes it difficult to integrate humanitarian approaches into the social support model. However, there may be other factors contributing to this situation.

Political issues. The so-called economic liberalization has not led to the development of effective mechanisms for the distribution and redistribution of resources. Moreover, the government's policy of promoting dominant views is only pursued briefly in the run-up to elections, after which it quickly ends and reverts to more familiar practices.

The legacy of the previous social policy system has influenced the mindset of many Armenians, as evidenced by a study conducted by the CRRC Foundation in Armenia. According to the study, 51% of respondents believe that 'the state should act as a parent' (Caucasian Barometer 2017). Our observations show that this trend had remained largely unchanged by 2020 and even intensified due to the influx of displaced populations.

Reaching social agreements in Armenia remains a challenging task due to the lack of consensus between taxpayers, social sector professionals, and low-income groups. Attempts to create a rational social security welfare system often encounter contradictions, sometimes leading to public resistance. Examples include the introduction of the accumulation pension system[1] in 2014 (Mkrtichian, Stepanian 2014), the deinstitutionalization of child care from 2016 to 2020 (Gevorgyan 2020), and the decentralization of social services from 2020 to 2022 (AASW 2023: 4). Furthermore, the choice of the most effective social technologies and mechanisms to overcome or alleviate poverty is a topic of ongoing debate (UNICEF 2020: 56–57; World Bank 2024: 76).

There is no consensus among experts on the optimal form of assistance to the poor – whether it should be the provision of meals, vouchers for dry rations, or cash transfers. There is also ongoing debate about how to link benefits to activation measures to make government support more effective in helping people transition to the labour market (World Bank 2024: 70; UNICEF 2020: 190–191). Disagreements also arise when trying to explain the causes of poverty, with different stakeholders pointing to different factors, such as a lack of motivation to work, labour market constraints, insufficient access to key resources (e.g., education or specialization), age dis-

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[1] There were specific reasons for this resistance, such as mistrust of the state system and age discrimination, which are the subject of a special study.

crimination, and structural or gender barriers to economic participation (Ramirez et. al 2021: 46–47; World Bank 2024: 46, 120).

Another issue is related to the economic efficiency of support programs and the predictability of alternative policy options. Nobel laureate H. Simon noted that evaluating all alternative policy options, their consequences, as well as the costs and benefits of each, is such a labor-intensive and costly process that the final policy improvement must be proportional to the extensive effort required for rational decision-making (Simon 1997). Simon's theory of bounded rationality recognizes the practical limits of full rationality. According to him, policymakers rely on bounded rationality by considering a limited number of alternatives, assessing outcomes using the best available methods, and selecting the option that achieves the most significant results at the least cost. The implementation of integrated social services in the Republic of Armenia appears to be a rational step towards a comprehensive social policy, which implies that further logical actions aimed at optimizing costs will follow.

Assessing the consequences of different policy alternatives and calculating their cost-benefit ratios is challenging, especially in the context of volatile processes such as war and post-war complications. Even with modern analytical methods, policymakers cannot fully predict outcomes due to a variety of objective factors. Economic forecasting is made particularly difficult by fluctuations of currency markets and the unpredictability of natural disasters. In addition, many conflicting costs and values are difficult to compare or measure. For example, it is difficult to weigh the 'cost' of individual dignity against the cost of raising taxes or the benefits of social assistance when it compromises dignity.

The ineffectiveness of innovative approaches may be due to the undervaluation and partial rejection of social work as an important social institution capable of counteracting polarization and social exclusion. This situation makes it difficult to develop rational solutions to complex social problems. Nevertheless, the focus remains on cash-based social services, including social guarantees and support programs, while the role of professional social work in the development of the social protection system remains undervalued. This issue is also reflected in the Government Program of the Republic of Armenia for 2021 (Government of RA 2021).

Conclusions

Dissatisfaction with security issues during the period of independence has kept them at the top of the agenda, hindering progress in peacebuilding, democratization, and civil society development in Armenia. It is important to note that the core principles of governance in Armenia have repeatedly hampered the process of democratization and related reforms, which, in turn, have affected social policy decisions.

Political turmoil and humanitarian crises have significantly slowed down and delayed the implementation of empowerment programs, including the trans-

formation of the social system. Instead, familiar distribution mechanisms were applied. Although policy objectives and documents were formulated with a holistic approach to social policy, the institutional mechanisms and instruments of the social protection system remained reductionist in their content and logic.

The current social welfare system remains reactive, focusing primarily on addressing the consequences of social issues. At the same time, comparatively limited resources are allocated to addressing the root causes of these problems. Although program documents emphasize self-sufficiency, participation, and 'empowerment,' the existing programs and resources do not provide the necessary conditions and prerequisites for the self-sufficiency of citizens and displaced persons.

Institutional inertia and beliefs associated with the paternalistic social welfare system continue to have a significant impact on the perceptions of both the population and the government. Existing mechanisms are insufficient to strengthen the self-help potential in traditional and transitional societies that could replace the paternalistic model. This potential is only partially realised and not integrated into the current system. As a result, this is an obstacle to transforming the system from a distributive model to one based on empowerment.

The main aim of the social welfare system is to empower people, prepare them for independent living, and enable them to solve their own problems. However, the science and practice of social work necessary to achieve these goals have not been fully implemented in the country. All the indicators of social policy — such as income, employment, healthcare, education, housing, culture, and the environment — are ultimately improved or realized through the development and functioning of a broad network of services that respond to existing social issues. If social services are seen as a means to achieve the main goal of assisting and empowering those in need, then it is logical either to establish social work services equivalent to traditional healthcare, education, and welfare services, or to replace them with broader social services. It is also important to establish close links between these institutions through social work.

The social protection system in Armenia lacks sufficient preparedness and preventative planning to respond to shocks and risks, including the absence of clear crisis response protocols. In the post-conflict situation with limited state resources, the humanitarian aid component is directly dependent on international support, which only partially meets the real needs of the population. Response measures have been implemented through the existing social protection system, in particular through government social services, but without significant adaptation of the roles and functions of the different actors. The involvement of different organizations based on their mandates has overloaded the system, further complicating its ability to respond effectively to the challenges.

There is still no consensus in society on the priority of values, especially on how to apply liberal ideas in parallel with the paternalistic ideology that still exists because of the inertia of the Soviet system (Antonyan 2017: 6; Khachatryan

2017: 20). There is a significant risk that, without increasing the amount of cash transfers and linking them to employment programs, a dependency on state support will develop among the displaced population. This could replicate the situation of the local population, where unconditional cash transfers, without mechanisms for exiting the welfare system, have led to long-term dependency.

Alternative approaches proposed by non-state actors have not been defined or discussed. There is a need to examine the potential impact of implementing such alternative technologies, including a cost-benefit analysis for both the target group and society as a whole. Formulas that would allow for achieving maximum social impact at minimum cost have yet to be developed.

While sustainable economic growth is important, it is not enough to overcome poverty. Macroeconomic policies are not always consistent with social policies, and economic growth does not always translate into poverty reduction. Policy implementation remains fragmented, as does support for displaced populations.

Abbreviations

AASW – Armenian Association of Social Workers
CRRC–Caucasus Research Resource Center
EDRC – Economic Development and Research Center
HCAV – Helsinki Citizens' Assembly of Vandzor
LDPC–Law development and Protections Foundation
PDP – Prospective Development Programme
PRSP – Poverty Reduction Strategy Programme
PRWB – Protection of Rights without Borders NGO
RA – Republic of Armenia
SDP – Sustainable Development Programme

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