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DELEGATION OF SOCIAL SERVICES AS A PRECONDITION FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LOCAL SOCIAL PLANS

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Introduction

It is a well-known fact that local social plans developed and implemented in partnership by all knowledgeable local stakeholders are the best mechanism to respond to the specific social protection needs of the community in a targeted and comprehensive way.

In recent years, the Government of the RA has implemented two major reforms in the sectors of local self-government and social security, which intersect with the issues of organizing the social protection of the community. In particular, the process of community enlargement is underway (there are currently 79 enlarged communities in Armenia), and the Unified Social Service system has been introduced to increase the effectiveness of social protection. Enlarged local self-government bodies are committed to developing a 5-year community development strategic plan, based on which the annual work plans, including a social protection component, will be developed.

Prior to the listed reforms, already in 2014 the Law on Social Assistance HO-231-N indicated the need of having a local social plan, which is also reflected in the Law on Local Self-Government (Article 48) in 2016. Moreover, on January 29, 2016 the methodology on the elaboration of local social plans was approved by the order of the RA Minister of MLSA N19-A / 1. It was aimed at assisting social workers/case managers of Integrated Social Services in developing local social plans with local governments. Despite the existence of these legal and methodological bases, no community has developed and implemented a local social plan so far.

Situation Analysis

In the context of the above-mentioned two radical reforms, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure of RA are the two major players in the process of addressing the social needs of the community and organizing social protection, however their scope of authority is not fully defined. In addition, there is no agreement on the funding resources for the development of local social plans and their implementation; in other words, it is not clear how a community without sufficient local resources should implement its mandatory responsibility to provide social services without the introduction of an appropriate delegation mechanism.

The Law HO-337 on Local Self-Government defines that the local self-government body must develop the local social plan in cooperation with the active public and private players of the community. However, it is not specified in any way what financial resources can be attracted for the development, and especially for the implementation of local social plans, therefore, in such situation, the local self-government bodies are not interested in taking on any additional "burden".

In fact, the resources from the state budget aimed at social protection are fully managed and controlled by the RA MLSA, including the delegation of services to the non-governmental sector (by the way, for now, the delegation is implemented without setting quality criteria for the services to be provided). The mandatory responsibility of communities in provision of social services has not yet been reflected anyhow, thus, mechanisms for decentralization of services and funding have not yet been established that

will allow the creation of additional community-based social services in the communities. That is why both annual and five-year plan reports present the picture of the social protection sector by the number of beneficiaries or pensioners (implemented under the authority of the MLSA) and the number of beneficiaries in the community receiving one-time assistance (as the only indicator of social services provided by the community to its residents).

It is logical that the definition of mandatory authorities of local self-government bodies in the sector necessarily raises the issue of decentralization of social services¹.

According to the RA Law on Social Assistance (on October 24, 2005, HO-207-N), 2006 the provision of social assistance services in five communities (Yerevan, Vanadzor, Masis, Ararat, and Jermuk) has been decentralized. This delegation, however, referred only to the Poverty Family Benefits Program, which arrangements remained in accordance with national standards. Consequently, the mentioned delegation did not transfer any independence to the local self-governments in terms of providing services (except for the issues related to the service personnel).

Later, in 2016 according to the amended Local Self-Government Law, local government bodies were required to comply with the requirements of the Social Assistance Law, in particular by integrating a social worker in communities with more than 5,000 population, which was a major step forward. However, local self-government bodies assign only one social worker also in those communities exceeding 5,000 multiple times.

In terms of decentralization of authorities, the delegation of a number of responsibilities/liabilities by the government to the communities of Gyumri and Vanadzor, including the implementation of state social programs in the community, was significant. Again, this process did not define in any way legislation to increase the community's financial resources, which led to an imbalance in the implementation of authorities and the financial resources required for it.

Thus, in the current situation, the local self-governments, despite the fixed responsibilities, are not yet significant players in solving the social problems of the community.

Strategy

It is obvious that in order to increase the efficiency of the social protection system of the population, it is inevitable to have local social plans, and for the implementation of the latter, the decentralization of social services. Therefore, the mutual agreement of the two main players, the RA MLSA and the RA MTAI, is primary in terms of defining their authorities in the field of social protection, as well redirecting the necessary state funds for their implementation. In other words, decentralizing social services and balancing the conditions of their delegation.

Besides the coordination and delegation of authorities, special attention should be paid to the distribution of the scope of the responsibilities of the levels of the social protection

¹2001 Armenia became a member of the Council of Europe, then in 2002. ratified the "European Charter of Local Self-Government", according to which the country undertook to develop the capacity of local self-government bodies and endow them with authorities, thus contributing to the decentralization.

system among the key actors. It is also necessary to determine what kind of methodologies and tools are needed to ensure the financial sustainability of services, their delegation by the communities to the non-governmental sector, and the control of the quality and efficiency of services.

In this context, the following additional aspects should be considered:

- In case of delegation of social services on the basis of developed local social plans, provision of additional financial means from the state budget in the form of subsidies or redirection of financial means to local self-government bodies;
- Taking into consideration lessons learned from the experience of delegation already put into practice by the MLSA, the introduction of standards for delegated services, by the development of standards aimed at quality assurance (expecting their development and provision by the MLSA);
- Along with the expansion of the authorities of the local self-government bodies in the field of social services, the implementation of actions aimed at increasing their capacity;
- Improvement and adaptation of methodology for the development of local social plans;
- Inclusion of local social plans as a mandatory component in the annual work plan of the community;
- Separation of the range and variety of social services at the level of self-government from unified state services;
- Revision of decision-making mechanisms of the social case management in enlarged communities in accordance with the changed functions of the USS and other players;
- Elaboration of by-laws and legal acts for the delegation of services and other preconditions necessary for the development and implementation of local social plans.