

Social Work Implementation in Azerbaijan: Assessing Institutional Capacity and Service Delivery Mechanisms

Abstract: This review paper examines the implementation of social work in Azerbaijan through the perspectives of institutional capacity, legal frameworks, and service delivery mechanisms. Social work in Azerbaijan has evolved within a post-Soviet context characterized by welfare transformation, social reforms, and institutional restructuring. Drawing upon existing scholarly literature, legal documents, and policy frameworks, the study critically analyzes the development of social work institutions, including the Law on Social Services [1], social service modernization initiatives, and the 2023–2026 State Program for the Development of Social Services. Comparative analysis with Switzerland and Sweden demonstrates substantial differences in governance structures, workforce capacity, and community-based service models. Findings indicate that although Azerbaijan has strengthened its legal and institutional foundations, practical implementation challenges remain regarding workforce development, regional disparities, centralized service delivery, and preventive care mechanisms. The study highlights the importance of localized institutional capacity and community-centered approaches for sustainable social work development.

Keywords: Social work; Azerbaijan; institutional capacity; social services; welfare systems; service delivery; social policy; post-Soviet transition.

Összefoglalás: A jelen tanulmány Azerbajdzsán szociálmunka-rendszerét vizsgálja az intézményi kapacitás, a jogi keretek és szolgáltatásnyújtási mechanizmusok szempontjából. Azerbajdzsánban a szociális munka fejlődése posztszovjet társadalmi és intézményi átalakulások közegében zajlott, amelyet jóléti reformok és strukturális változások alakítottak. A tanulmány szakirodalmi források, jogszabályok és szakpolitikai dokumentumok alapján elemzi a szociális munka intézményes fejlődését, különös tekintettel a Szociális

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[1] Social Services Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2024): *Institutional functions and social service delivery mechanisms*. <https://social.gov.az/en/ministry/social-services-agency>

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[2] Rajabov, T. (2011): *Social Work in Azerbaijan: Development in the Post-Soviet Era*. In: S. Stanley (Ed.): *Social Work Education in Countries of the East*. Hauppauge: Nova Science Publishers.

Szolgáltatásokról szóló törvényre [1], a modernizációs kezdeményezésekre és a 2023–2026 közötti állami fejlesztési programra. A Svájjal és Svédországgal végzett összehasonlító elemzés jelentős különbségeket mutat az irányítási struktúrák, a munkaerő-kapacitás és a közösségi alapú szolgáltatások terén. Az eredmények alapján megállapítható, hogy bár Azerbajdzsán erősítette intézményi és jogi kereteit, továbbra is kihívások maradtak a gyakorlati megvalósítás területén.

Kulcsszavak: Szociális munka; Azerbajdzsán; intézményi kapacitás; szociális szolgáltatások; jóléti rendszer; szolgáltatásnyújtás; szociálpolitika; posztszovjet átmenet.

Introduction

Social work is a professional field dedicated to improving human well-being, promoting social justice, and supporting vulnerable individuals through interventions at individual, family, and community levels. Across welfare systems, social work serves as an important mechanism connecting social policy with practical support services. However, the development and implementation of social work differs substantially across countries due to variations in historical experiences, institutional traditions, and welfare structures.

Azerbaijan represents a distinctive case because social work emerged within a post-Soviet transitional environment rather than through the gradual welfare-state evolution observed in many Western countries. Following independence in 1991, Azerbaijan experienced significant economic and social transformations associated with market reforms, demographic changes, poverty challenges, migration processes, and large-scale internal displacement caused by regional conflict [2]. These transformations created increasing demand for modern social protection mechanisms and professional social service provision. Simultaneously, inherited Soviet welfare structures were not fully equipped to respond to newly emerging social problems and individualized service needs. Unlike countries such as Sweden, Germany, and the United Kingdom, where social work developed through long-term institutional professionalization and community-based welfare systems, Azerbaijan followed a predominantly top-down developmental trajectory. International organizations, external educational initiatives, and public sector reforms played an important role in introducing and institutionalizing social work education and practice [2].

Professional social work education formally began in Azerbaijan in 2005 with the establishment of the first Master of Social Work program and subsequently expanded into bachelor and doctoral programs. The literature indicates that the profession has experienced rapid institutional development over a relatively short period. According to Huseynli [3], social work in Azerbaijan achieved important progress through increasing public sector acceptance and stronger institutionalization processes. However, the profession continues to face substantial barriers, including weak professional identity, misconceptions regarding social work roles, insufficient employment opportunities for graduates, and limited social recognition.

Previous scholarly studies have addressed various dimensions of social work development in Azerbaijan. Rajabov [2] analyzed the emergence of social work within the post-Soviet context and emphasized institutional ambiguity and insufficient legal foundations during early implementation phases. Ahmadli [4] further highlighted that an important turning point occurred following the adoption of the Law on Social Services in 2012, which formally recognized social work and introduced educational and professional requirements for practitioners. In parallel, broader studies on social welfare and vulnerable populations in Azerbaijan reveal persistent structural challenges affecting service implementation. For example, Claypool et al. [5] demonstrated that socioeconomic vulnerabilities, inadequate support systems, and institutional limitations significantly shape pathways into social care systems, particularly among women and children. These findings suggest that social service systems require stronger community-based and preventive approaches rather than institution-centered responses.

Despite growing literature, several important research gaps remain. Existing studies predominantly focus on historical development, educational evolution, or professional identity formation. Limited attention has been devoted to evaluating institutional capacity and service delivery mechanisms associated with practical implementation. More specifically, insufficient research examines whether current institutions possess the workforce readiness, organizational coordination, and administrative capabilities required for sustainable social work implementation. This issue is particularly important because Azerbaijan has recently accelerated digital and institutional reforms within its social service system through modernization initiatives and integrated electronic social service mechanisms.

[2] Rajabov, T. (2011): Social Work in Azerbaijan: Development in the Post-Soviet Era. In: S. Stanley (Ed.): *Social Work Education in Countries of the East*. Hauppauge: Nova Science Publishers.

[3] Huseynli, A. (2023). Social work in Azerbaijan: Achievements and challenges of a new profession. *International Social Work*, 66., (5.), pp. 1527–1541.

[4] Ahmadli, K. (2018): *Social Work in Azerbaijan.*, Available at: *Khanbala Ahmadli publication page*.

[5] Claypool, E.–Tsetreteli, N. et al. (2019): A gender-focused analysis of structural and social pathways to institutional placement of children in Azerbaijan. *Social Science & Medicine*, 232., pp. 42–49.

Nevertheless, institutional effectiveness and implementation capacity remain underexplored areas in existing scholarship.

Therefore, the primary aim of this review paper is to critically assess social work implementation in Azerbaijan through the examination of institutional capacity and service delivery mechanisms. The study seeks to synthesize existing evidence, identify implementation barriers and opportunities, and contribute to a broader understanding of social work development within Azerbaijan's unique post-Soviet context.

Institutional Capacity and Social Work Policy in Azerbaijan: Legal and Comparative Perspectives

The institutional capacity of social work systems refers to the ability of governmental and non-governmental institutions to design policies, coordinate stakeholders, maintain a qualified workforce, and ensure sustainable and accessible service delivery. In transitional societies, legal reforms alone do not automatically translate into effective implementation. Institutional capacity also depends on administrative structures, professional workforce development, inter-agency cooperation, and localized service mechanisms. Within Azerbaijan, social work implementation has gradually evolved through legislative reforms and institutional restructuring; however, practical capacity limitations continue to affect service effectiveness.

The legal foundation of social protection in Azerbaijan is rooted in Article 38 of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, which guarantees citizens the right to social protection under conditions such as unemployment, disability, old age, and other vulnerable circumstances. This constitutional provision established the broader welfare basis upon which social work and social service mechanisms later developed. A significant institutional shift occurred with the adoption of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On Social Services" (Law No. 275-IVQ) on 30 December 2011. The law established the legal, organizational, and economic foundations of social service provision and defined social services as comprehensive interventions intended to eliminate social difficulties and facilitate participation in social life. Importantly, it introduced the concept of "persons in difficult life situations" and formally identified social workers and service providers as actors within the system.

The adoption of this legislation represented an important departure from traditional welfare approaches focused mainly on financial assistance. The law expanded service provision to include social counseling, rehabilitation, adaptation support, home-based care, and institutional services. Moreover, it encouraged cooperation between state agencies and non-governmental organizations.

International assessments also recognized the law as a positive development facilitating state-civil society collaboration in social service provision [6]. The institutional structure responsible for implementation primarily consists of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Population and the Social Services Agency. The Social Services Agency functions as a public legal entity implementing state policy concerning social services and social protection for vulnerable groups. It coordinates with government institutions, local authorities, and non-governmental actors while implementing social assistance and rehabilitation services.

Institutional modernization has further accelerated through electronic governance initiatives. Platforms such as DOST and integrated digital social systems were introduced to improve accessibility, transparency, and administrative coordination. Digitalization efforts reflect Azerbaijan's broader public administration reform strategy and seek to reduce bureaucratic fragmentation in service provision.

Recent state reforms also indicate increasing policy commitment toward institutional strengthening. The State Program for Development of Social Services in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2023–2026 prioritizes expansion of social service accessibility, strengthening human resources, improving service quality, and increasing institutional coordination. These objectives indicate a policy transition toward broader social support mechanisms beyond traditional social assistance systems. Additionally, related legislation concerning disability rights, domestic violence prevention, social adaptation, child protection, and targeted social assistance contributes to the broader institutional framework of social work implementation.

Despite substantial legislative progress, existing research suggests that institutional capacity remains constrained by workforce and implementation issues. Huseynli [3] argued that social work in Azerbaijan continues facing weak professional identity, limited public understanding of social work functions, and insufficient career opportunities. Rajabov (2011) similarly noted that social work development occurred largely through administrative and externally supported institutional reforms rather than through endogenous professional expansion. Consequently, institutional growth has often outpaced workforce development and service specialization.

These challenges become more visible when Azerbaijan is compared with Western welfare systems such as Switzerland. Switzerland operates a highly decentralized

[3] Huseynli, A. (2023): Social work in Azerbaijan: Achievements and challenges of a new profession. *International Social Work*, 66., (5.), pp. 1527–1541.

[6] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2012): *Consideration of reports submitted by States parties: Azerbaijan*. <https://hrlibrary.umn.edu/crc/azerbaijan2012.html>

welfare model in which municipalities and cantonal authorities possess significant autonomy in social service delivery. Social work services in Switzerland rely heavily upon localized community interventions, interdisciplinary cooperation, preventive care mechanisms, and strong professional autonomy. Social workers frequently collaborate with healthcare institutions, educational actors, local governments, and civil society organizations to provide individualized interventions. In contrast, Azerbaijan maintains a relatively centralized service delivery structure in which state institutions continue to exercise primary responsibility over planning and implementation. While centralization may improve policy standardization, it may simultaneously limit localized adaptation and community responsiveness. Furthermore, Western systems increasingly prioritize deinstitutionalization and preventive family-based support mechanisms, whereas post-Soviet systems historically inherited stronger institutional care traditions.

The challenge therefore extends beyond legal reform itself. Institutional capacity should not be evaluated only through laws, agencies, or digital systems. Sustainable social work implementation requires qualified personnel, community-based infrastructure, interdisciplinary coordination, and institutional trust. Although Azerbaijan demonstrates considerable progress regarding social policy modernization, institutional capacity gaps related to workforce readiness and localized care structures continue to shape the practical implementation of social work services.

Comparative Analysis of Social Work Service Mechanisms: Azerbaijan and Western Welfare Models

The effectiveness of social work systems depends not only on legal frameworks but also on institutional capacity, service delivery mechanisms, workforce availability, and governance structures. Comparative evidence suggests that welfare systems with decentralized and community-oriented social services frequently demonstrate stronger responsiveness to local needs. In contrast, transitional and post-Soviet contexts often face implementation challenges related to institutional centralization, limited workforce capacity, and inherited administrative structures. Azerbaijan represents an important case where rapid institutional reforms have occurred; however, practical service delivery mechanisms continue to evolve.

One of the principal distinctions between Azerbaijan and Western welfare systems concerns governance structure and decentralization. Countries such as Switzerland and Sweden operate social service systems characterized by strong local autonomy and community-based service provision. In Switzerland, responsibility for social assistance and social work implementation primarily rests with cantons and municipalities, allowing local authorities substantial discretion in adapting services according to regional needs.

Approximately 80–90% of the Swiss population lives within the service area of professional local social service institutions, reflecting broad community accessibility and localized support structures [7]. Moreover, Switzerland maintains over 2,100 municipalities with delegated social welfare responsibilities, creating highly localized and flexible welfare delivery mechanisms [7].

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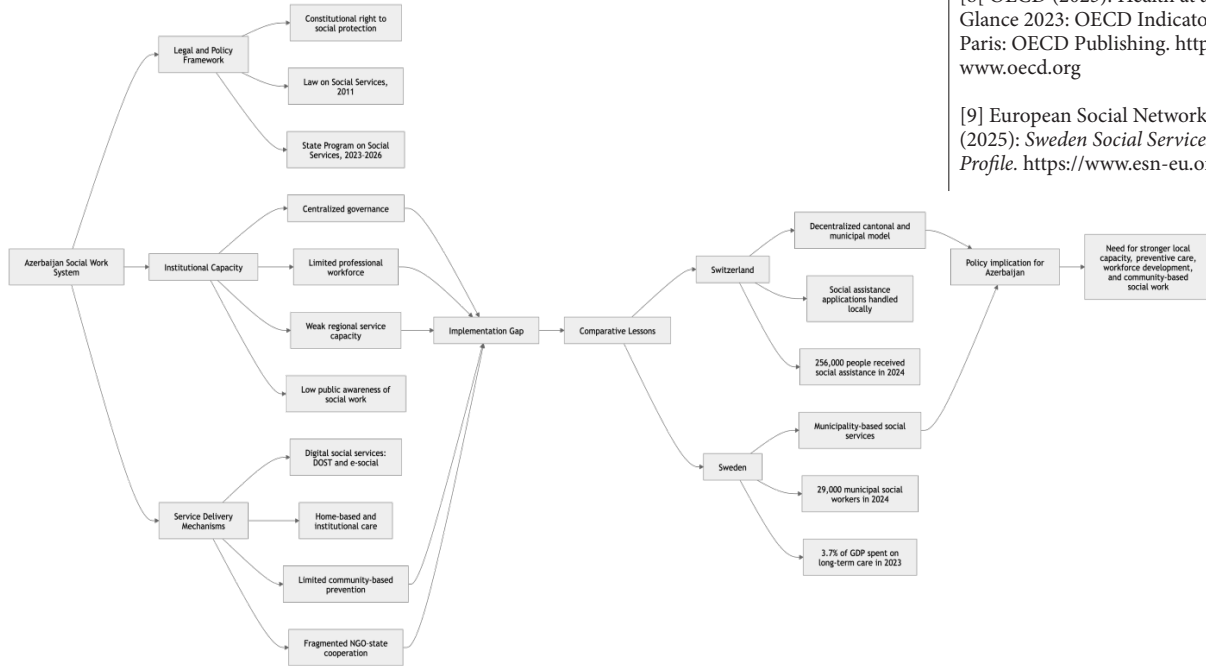
[3] Huseynli, A. (2023). *Social work in Azerbaijan: Achievements and challenges of a new profession*. *International Social Work*, 66., (5.), pp. 1527–1541.

[7] Swiss Federal Statistical Office (2024): *Social Assistance Statistics*. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch>

[8] OECD (2023): *Health at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://www.oecd.org>

[9] European Social Network (2025): *Sweden Social Services Profile*. <https://www.esn-eu.org>

Figure 1. Comparative chain model of social work implementation in Azerbaijan, Switzerland, and Sweden



Source: Developed by the author based on Rajabov [2], Huseynli [3], Swiss Federal Statistical Office [7], European Social Network [9], OECD [8], and legal documents of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

[3] Huseynli, A. (2023). Social work in Azerbaijan: Achievements and challenges of a new profession. *International Social Work*, 66., (5), pp. 1527–1541.

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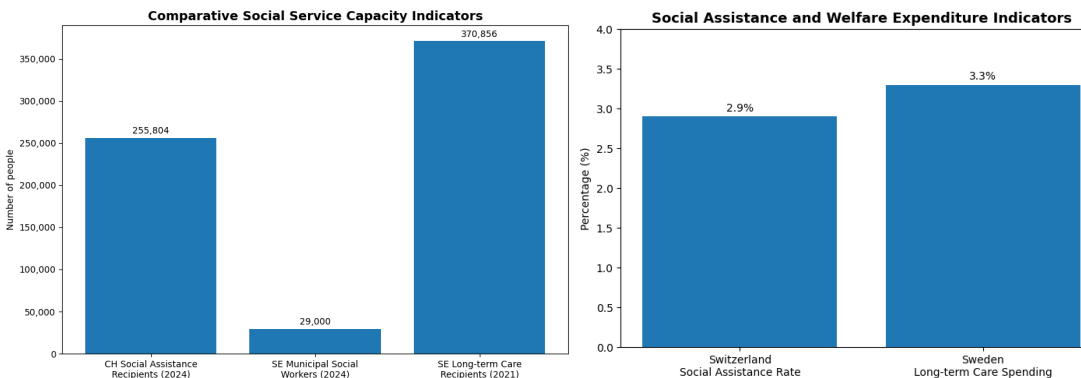
[9] European Social Network (2025): *Sweden Social Services Profile*. <https://www.esn-eu.org>

The *Figure 1* shows that Azerbaijan has developed important legal and policy foundations, including the Law on Social Services and the State Program for 2023–2026. However, implementation challenges remain linked to centralized governance, limited professional workforce capacity, weak regional services, and insufficient community-based prevention. In contrast, Switzerland relies on cantonal and municipal social assistance structures, with 256,000 people receiving social assistance in 2024, while Sweden demonstrates stronger municipal social work capacity, including 29,000 municipal social workers in 2024 and long-term care spending of 3.7% of GDP in 2023. These comparisons suggest that Azerbaijan’s next stage of reform should focus on local institutional capacity, preventive care, and professional workforce development.

By comparison, Azerbaijan maintains a more centralized institutional structure where social services remain primarily coordinated by state institutions through the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and affiliated agencies. While centralization may facilitate policy standardization and administrative control, research indicates that excessive centralization may reduce local adaptability and responsiveness toward diverse social needs. In Azerbaijan, regional disparities remain visible because professional social work infrastructure and specialized services are concentrated largely in urban areas, particularly Baku, while peripheral regions frequently experience service limitations [3].

Sweden provides another useful comparison due to its emphasis on preventive, community-oriented, and evidence-based social service systems. According to recent social service workforce data, approximately 43,460 social workers were employed across Sweden in 2020, with nearly 85% working within public institutions and approximately 29,000 employed directly by municipalities by 2024 [9]. Swedish social policy further emphasizes preventive interventions, family support, and knowledge-based care approaches implemented through local municipalities. Long-term care expenditure in Sweden also demonstrates substantial institutional investment. Sweden allocated approximately 2.9% of GDP to long-term care expenditure, substantially above many OECD averages, while maintaining approximately 66.4 long-term care beds per 1,000 elderly citizens [8].

Figure 2. Comparative Social Service Capacity Indicators and Social Assistance and Welfare Expenditure Indicators



Source: Swiss Federal Statistical Office [7]; European Social Network [9]; [8].

Comparative evidence demonstrates substantial differences in social service capacity and governance structures across welfare systems. Switzerland reported 255,804 social assistance recipients in 2024, with a social assistance rate of 2.9%, managed primarily through decentralized municipal and cantonal structures that enable localized decision-making and service adaptation (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2024). In contrast, Sweden demonstrates stronger preventive welfare capacity through municipality-centered social service delivery mechanisms. Recent estimates indicate that Sweden employed approximately 29,000 municipal social workers in 2024, while allocating approximately 3.2–3.4% of GDP toward long-term care expenditure, reflecting considerable institutional investment in welfare and preventive social support systems [8, 9].

In contrast, Azerbaijan continues facing several implementation constraints regarding social service mechanisms. First, workforce capacity remains limited. Although educational programs have expanded, the profession itself remains relatively new, and shortages of specialized personnel continue affecting service quality and institutional effectiveness [2, 3]. Second, public understanding of social work roles remains limited. Misconceptions often reduce social workers' professional visibility and weaken interdisciplinary cooperation.

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[5] Claypool, E.–Tseteli, N. et al. (2019): A gender-focused analysis of structural and social pathways to institutional placement of children in Azerbaijan. *Social Science & Medicine*, 232., pp. 42–49.

[10] Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan No. 275-IVQ on Social Services. (2011): *Official legal framework of social services in Azerbaijan*. <https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=51474>

Third, Azerbaijan still demonstrates partial dependence on institutional care approaches inherited from Soviet administrative structures. Western systems increasingly prioritize deinstitutionalization and preventive family-based support services, whereas Azerbaijan remains in a transitional phase. Previous studies examining vulnerable populations and institutional pathways suggest that stronger community-based intervention mechanisms and preventive services are still needed [5]. Therefore, comparative evidence suggests that Azerbaijan's principal challenge is not the absence of legislation but rather the implementation capacity of institutions responsible for delivering services. While legal reforms and state programs have strengthened institutional foundations, sustainable social work systems require workforce expansion, localized decision-making mechanisms, stronger municipal engagement, and community-centered care structures. International experience from Switzerland and Sweden demonstrates that institutional effectiveness frequently emerges from decentralized and preventive service ecosystems rather than administrative expansion alone.

Conclusion

This review examined the implementation of social work in Azerbaijan through the perspectives of institutional capacity, legal frameworks, and service delivery mechanisms. The findings indicate that Azerbaijan has made notable progress in establishing the institutional foundations of social work through legislative reforms, the adoption of the Law on Social Services [10], expansion of social work education, digitalization initiatives such as DOST, and implementation of the 2023–2026 State Program for the Development of Social Services. These developments demonstrate increasing governmental recognition of social work as an essential component of the national social protection system. However, the review also suggests that legal and organizational reforms have progressed more rapidly than practical implementation capacity. Persistent challenges remain in relation to workforce shortages, uneven regional service provision, limited public understanding of social work functions, and insufficient community-based and preventive care mechanisms. Existing institutional arrangements continue to reflect elements of centralized administrative traditions, which may constrain local flexibility and service responsiveness.

Comparative evidence from Switzerland and Sweden further illustrates that effective social work systems rely not only on formal institutions but also on decentralized governance structures, strong municipal engagement, professional workforce development, and preventive service models. These experiences suggest that institutional effectiveness emerges through local implementation ecosystems rather than through administrative expansion alone. The findings imply that future policy efforts in Azerbaijan should focus on strengthening local institutional capacity, expanding professional social work infrastructure, increasing interdisciplinary cooperation, and supporting community-centered service approaches. As social work remains a relatively young profession in Azerbaijan, additional empirical research is needed to evaluate implementation outcomes, regional disparities, and long-term institutional sustainability. Such efforts may contribute to developing a more adaptive and context-sensitive social work model capable of addressing emerging social challenges within Azerbaijan's evolving welfare landscape.