DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AS A DRIVER FOR IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INTEGRATED SOCIAL SERVICES *

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The purpose of this article is to explore the impact of digitalization on social protection systems, with a focus on how it improves service delivery mechanisms, efficiency, and accessibility. While the benefits of digital transformation are clear, the full digitalization of social services presents challenges for developing countries, and existing industry research insufficiently clarifies the intricate consequences of this phenomenon. This article seeks to address this gap by examining the benefits of digitalization, such as enhanced efficiency and accessibility, while also analyzing challenges, including the risks of digital exclusion and data privacy violations.

The research employed analytical, synthetic, inductive, and deductive methods.

The article elucidates the advantages and obstacles of delivering digital services, specifically emphasizing the unified social service of the Republic of Armenia. The article's novelty stems from its holistic approach, integrating global trends in digital transformation with the digitalization necessities of the USS. It underscores the determinants of successful digitalization, including legal reforms, enhanced digital literacy, and upgraded infrastructure, which should influence decision-makers and implementers.

Keywords: *Digital Transformation, Social Service Delivery, Social Protection, Unified Social Service (USS), Public Sector Efficiency, Data-Driven Decision-Making, Digital Infrastructure, Management Information Systems (MIS), Service Accessibility.*

Introduction

In modern days, there has been a remarkable transformation in the arrangements and functioning of social protection systems due to the use of technology in service delivery systems. Social protection systems and services have courted various digital channels by quite a considerable number of countries around the globe in the hope of increasing efficiency, availability, management, as well as the quality of the services in order to better cater to the needs of the population. The purpose of this article is to explore the impact of digitalization on social protection systems, with a focus on how it improves service delivery mechanisms, efficiency, and accessibility. The article seeks to contextualize global trends, benefits, and challenges within Armenia’s USS to provide actionable insights for enhancing its digital transformation. The objectives are to analyze global trends and best practices in digitalizing social protection systems, evaluate the

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benefits and challenges of integrating digital tools, and examine the current state of digitalization within the USS. The article aims to make a positive contribution to the existing literature regarding digital transformation by exploring its positive impacts and challenges and further localizing the scope of analysis in the Armenian context.

The research employed a combination of analysis, synthesis, induction, and deduction to provide a comprehensive understanding of the digitalization of social protection systems and its implications for Armenia's USS. The method of analysis was used to break down the digitalization process into distinct stages of the social protection delivery chain, examining the impacts of digital tools on efficiency and accessibility. Synthesis integrated these findings to link global trends and challenges with Armenia's context. Induction was applied to derive broader insights from observed practices, while deduction tested theoretical frameworks, such as the Integrated Information System model, against Armenia's social protection system. This structured approach ensured a thorough and relevant exploration, providing actionable recommendations for improving Armenia's USS.

Global Overview of Digitalization in Social Protection

The rapid integration of new technologies has substantially altered the landscape of social protection in recent years. This digital transformation has been a global trend, affecting low-, middle-, and high-income economies. Digital solutions have been integrated into a variety of service delivery processes, including the initial phases of beneficiary identification and enrollment, as well as the ongoing management and evaluation of social protection programs. The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated this trend, as governments worldwide have promptly instituted socially distanced mechanisms to maintain the provision of essential services at an unprecedented scale and speed (Gentilini 2-5; Lowe 18-22). Nevertheless, the rapid pace of innovation has left little time for a thorough evaluation of the digitalization initiatives that have already been implemented, and even less opportunity to outline the future course of these endeavors.

Technology has become integrated into the traditional social protection service delivery chain in numerous countries, where digitalization is present in every part of the service delivery process. This phenomenon is observed in the improved handling of data and the restructuring of corporate operations through the utilization of modern technical tools and platforms (Socialprotection.org official website, 2021). Digitalization has had a diverse impact on each phase of the social protection delivery chain, from outreach and intake to benefit provision and monitoring. Table 1 (World Bank 10-39; International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth 7-44; Eurofound (b) 13-30) systematically delineates and analyzes these phases, as well as their descriptions and the specific effects of digitalization.

Table 1. Digitalization Across Social Protection Delivery Service Chain

STAGE	PHASE DESCRIPTION	DIGITALIZATION EFFECT
Outreach	This stage is dedicated to the enhancement of knowledge regarding social protection-related activities. In the past, outreach programs have generally relied on physical activities and materials. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a shift in techniques to facilitate the more prevalent and efficient dissemination of information.	The process of digitalization has revolutionized communication by facilitating the utilization of SMS, phone calls, messaging applications, emails, and social media platforms. These tools provide more comprehensive and focused communication, bolstered by digital applications such as chatbots and automated call systems.

Intake & Registration	This stage involves data collection. Traditionally, this process entailed the manual gathering of data through face-to-face interviews or surveys like a census, typically carried out at local establishments or by visiting households directly.	The introduction of digital technologies has enhanced the efficacy and precision of data acquisition. Additionally, the selection of appropriate candidates is facilitated by modernized electronic databases, which streamlines the process.
Needs Assessment	During this stage, the assessment of the participant requirements and circumstances is carried out to ascertain their eligibility and the specific assistance they need. Commonly, this practice involved utilizing socio-economic evaluations such as proxy-means tests or questionnaires.	The advent of digitalization has brought to the use of sophisticated data analysis methods, such as machine learning algorithms and predictive analytics, enabling more precise and efficient evaluations. These tools have the capability to examine novel forms of data, including credit ratings and mobile phone usage, in order to more accurately detect and forecast demands.
Enrollment	This stage involves assessing eligibility for social protection programs and formally enrolling persons into these programs. Traditionally, this process necessitated manual evaluations conducted by personnel to determine eligibility and the number of benefits, which was then followed by in-person enrollment of recipients.	Digitalization has led to the introduction of automated decision-making systems that reduce the need for manual evaluations by determining eligibility and benefit levels using real-time data. The requirement for in-person interactions has decreased as a result of the streamlining of notification and onboarding procedures through digital communication channels.
Provision of Benefits and Services	This stage entails the allocation of goods and services to qualified individuals. Previously, these services were provided in person or by hand, which always involved a significant amount of interaction and documentation.	The backend administration and the actual distribution of benefits have been transformed by digitalization. Advanced technologies such as blockchain are being explored, and payments are being made through electronic channels such as bank transfers, mobile money, and digital wallets. The provision of services has also undergone a transition to digital platforms, which have enabled the virtual delivery of services and the automation of specific.
Participant Operations Management	Currently, the information about the participants is continuously checked and afterwards applicable services are diagnosed. In the past, updating data, registering complaints, and monitoring adherence to program requirements necessitated physical encounters and data updates.	The advent of digitalization has significantly improved the management of participant operations with the use of online and mobile portals, which enable users to easily access, modify, and oversee their profiles. Data updates, compliance monitoring, and grievance redress are now handled by automated and semi-automated systems, resulting in substantial enhancements in efficiency and accessibility.
Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning	This stage involves assessing the advantages and/or mechanisms of social protection and improving their effectiveness. Traditionally, this process necessitated manual observation, monitoring, inspections, and evaluations, entailing significant human labor.	The process of digitalization has brought about the use of sophisticated tools that enable real-time monitoring, automated identification of errors and fraud, and evaluation based on data analysis. Technologies such as big data analytics enhance the precision, transparency, and efficiency of monitoring, assessment, and learning procedures.

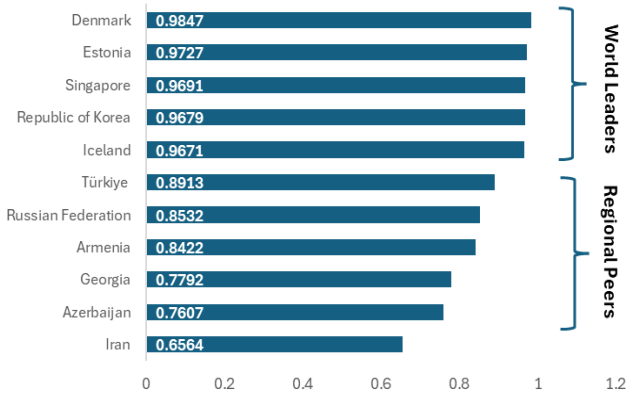
Efficient management of social protection programs requires strong technical expertise, especially in areas such as planning, administration, and governance. An essential aspect of this capability is the incorporation of digital tools via an effective information management system (MIS), which is crucial for the organization and provision of services. Although the lack of a working Management Information System (MIS) can greatly hinder development, implementing a digital transformation process can improve the capacity of institutions to effectively support marginalized populations, such as individuals with disabilities. By incorporating digital integration, institutions can optimize their operations, enhance service delivery, and ultimately enhance their ability to meet the needs of their intended beneficiaries (International Labour Organization official website).

In addition to MIS, several countries have already practiced the so-called Integrated Information System (IIS) to address the issue of fast and precise social service delivery. The IIS refers to a large systematic approach that integrates and manages different information technologies, data, and processes of one or more organizations (Pervan and Dropulić 21-38). ISS aims to reduce time and effort, integrate straightforward information systems, and ultimately improve data-driven and fast decision-making. It is crucial for the smooth performance of health services, financial management, and public administration. Several countries have established the use of Integrated Information Systems, most notably in healthcare. Such an instance is an Estonian X-tee (until 2018 it was called X-Road), an integrated digital infrastructure that connects various databases, enabling seamless data exchange between different government agencies and private sector entities (Republic of Estonia - Information System Authority official website). The Estonian Central Health Information System, as part of this framework, provides full and secure electronic health records for patients and providers (European Commission official website). This system has resulted in improved patient outcomes, reduced administrative costs, and enhanced overall healthcare quality.

Benchmarking Armenia's Digitalization Progress

Figure 1 depicts the E-Government Development Index (EGDI) for 2024, contrasting Armenia's performance with world leaders in digital governance and its regional counterparts. The EGDI is a composite metric that assesses three essential characteristics of e-government: the provision of online services, telecommunication connection, and human capacity. In 2024, the global average EGDI score is 0.6382, emphasizing a substantial disparity between the world's elites, including Denmark (0.9847) and Estonia (0.9727), and the rest of the world. Armenia's score of 0.8422 places it 48th globally, far above the global average and demonstrates significant progress in the development of e-government (UN official website on E-Government Development Index).

Figure 1. E-Government Development Index 2024: World Leaders and Armenia's Regional Peers



In comparison to its regional counterparts, including Türkiye (0.8913) and the Russian Federation (0.8532), Armenia's score suggests a potential for enhancement, especially in developing digital infrastructure and human capital to align with the performance of leading nations. This comparison emphasizes Armenia's advancements in e-government and identifies chances to improve its international reputation.

Impact on Efficiency and Accessibility

The digitalization of social protection systems has resulted in significant improvements in service efficiency and accessibility. By utilizing digital tools and platforms, these systems have become more adaptable, simple to use, and economical. This transition has improved the overall user experience, simplifying the process for recipients to obtain services without the inconvenient requirement of in-person visits. Additionally, digitization has enhanced the accuracy and transparency of the service delivery system, guaranteeing accurate resource allocation and preventing errors and fraud. Furthermore, extensive advanced data analysis has allowed service providers to improve resource utilization, reduce expenses, and improve program design and implementation effectiveness. These innovations improve the overall performance and accessibility of the social protection system, benefiting both the clients and the system providers.

The following key impacts on efficiency and accessibility were identified during the research process:

INCREASED ACCURACY AND EFFICIENCY | Improved accuracy and efficiency are achieved through the implementation of digital tools in the provision of social protection services. This is achieved by reducing the likelihood of errors, increasing control over fraud, and ensuring that the benefits are actually received by the intended recipients. Automated data comparisons and advanced surveillance enable the identification and elimination of duplicate and ineligible participants from the system, thereby enhancing its integrity (Lowe et al. 51-58). In addition to their impact on administrative load, digital technologies, such as easy-to-use technology under the digitization category, have the potential to enhance production levels, as they eliminate the need for physical space for most service delivery tasks (Eurofound (a) 15-22).

COST EFFICIENCY | Digitalization decreases the costs linked to delivering social protection services, leading to significant savings and enhanced allocation of resources. Automated procedures improve operational efficiency by freeing up staff resources, allowing them to focus on complex tasks while also reducing the need for in-person interactions and manual data handling (Banerjee et al. 16-27).

IMPROVED ACCESS | The process of digitalization greatly enhances the ease of access and the standard of social protection services. Participants can enhance their interaction with services through the implementation of digital platforms that are user-friendly and adaptive, hence minimizing the necessity for in-person visits. Consequently, the procedure enhances efficiency, reduces travel expenses, and saves time. These factors contribute to making social protection services more accessible and less intimidating for consumers (OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation official website).

DATA-DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING | The implementation of data services through digital means has remarkably enhanced the data quality and data access to service providers. This data assists in engineering worthwhile decisions and, as a result, enhances further monitoring, evaluation, and information about specific changes to social protection programs. Using advanced data analytics, service providers can evaluate program effectiveness, measure policy impact gaps, or even model the outcomes of policy alternatives. Improved data systems also promote the unification of several data

sources to create an informed and inclusive approach to designing and implementing social protection (Center for Global Development 1-8; GIZ 8-33).

Challenges in Digitalization Efforts

Undoubtedly, embracing such digital approaches to social protection has brought about advantages; however, these digital systems do have certain limitations and challenges that tend to undermine their effectiveness. These challenges may affect both users and service providers and range from data protection, inclusion, effectiveness, sustainability, and so on. Solving these problems is not easy and necessitates the introduction of severe limitations to ensure that digital improvements achieve more, rather than putting social protection off.

The following key challenges were identified during the research process:

INSTITUTIONAL FRAGMENTATION | The implementation of social services in the context of digitalization faces challenges arising from institutional fragmentation and the absence of a dedicated entity responsible for overseeing the digital transformation process. The presence of numerous, separate databases containing information about service users exacerbates this fragmentation, hindering the efficient delivery and coordination of services (Eurofound (b) 27-30).

DATA PROTECTION VIOLATIONS | The gathering and processing of sensitive information, primarily concerning vulnerable populations, endangers the protection of data and privacy. Therefore, preceding the establishment of laws and their enforcement, there is greater concern over data misuse by either the state or a corporation/partner. Furthermore, the ethical concerns associated with data use, particularly for social protection are gaining momentum (Wright 1-12; Lowe 18-22).

RESISTANCE TO TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE | One of the most notable issues presented in the process of digitalizing social services is that both employees and users are resistant to using new technologies, especially those that are believed to overshadow or substitute their face-to-face interactions. This is because people fear that using these digital tools will make the services less personal. Many of the employees and users in social services prefer the human touch in service delivery due to its greater humanistic orientation. On the other hand, reluctance to digital technology stems, in part, from a lack of knowledge and skills relevant to such technology usage, as well as a breach of privacy (Eurofound (b) 27-30).

EXCLUSION | Digital interventions do have the potential to widen existing gaps, particularly among those who are already poorly connected to digital infrastructure or have low levels of digital and financial skills. The digital societal welfare systems pose a high risk of exclusion for vulnerable populations such as women, the elderly, and those living in rural settings (Muralidharan 28-30; Eurofound (b) 27-30).

FINANCIAL BARRIERS | One of the major problems hindering the digital transformation of social services is the absence of sufficient funds. There is often underfunding, which leads to the hiring of limited personnel whose work is just to use the already existing processes and not to enhance new digital initiatives. The absence of adequate financial support frequently results in ambitious digital strategies failing to achieve their objectives. In addition, the financial sustainability of digital initiatives is further complicated by "vendor lock-in," which occurs when governments are contractually prohibited from altering providers or systems. The scarcity of essential skilled personnel to aid in the operation or maintenance of the system worsens this problem for low-income nations (Kidd et al. 32-35).

POLITICAL BARRIERS | Aside from the lack of funding, political will, or its absence, is another major obstacle to the digitalization of social services. Factors such as a lack of political will and a lack of a long-term perspective can severely hamper efforts to

digitalize. Generally, the lack of domestic support for these digitalization initiatives leads to their perceived short-lived nature. Where there is no clear commitment from the political class, even adequately funded projects are unlikely to meet their intended objectives, as there will be insufficient drive to move the agenda forward and make continued progress (Ernsdorff and Berbec 171-183; World Bank 7-12).

Implications for Armenia's Unified Social Srvice

In light of the possible advantages and obstacles associated with digitalization, it is essential to take into account the following elements when executing digital initiatives for the Unified Social Service (USS) of Armenia. These considerations emphasize fundamental principles pertinent to the Armenian context, underscoring aspects that require focus to ensure a seamless digital transition.

EFFECTIVE LEGAL FOUNDATIONS | Investment in digitization within the USS will largely depend on the development of appropriate legal regulations and policies, ensuring institutional capacity, and creating digital public infrastructure. Drawing up effective and reliable legal measures for information protection is critical, as digital services entail the collection of confidential information. An organized legal framework will be established to safeguard data management processes from unlawful imposition. Additionally, it is imperative to cultivate political consensus among key government stakeholders, as this will enable the implementation of digital innovations that are both innovative and motivating.

BROAD-BASED USER PARTICIPATION | The success of digital strategies will be contingent upon the level of engagement and participation of the Armenian population. It is particularly crucial to enhance the digital and financial literacy of vulnerable social groups, such as the elderly, rural residents, and low-income individuals. Improving digital skills necessitates simplifying the process of obtaining education, classes, and support. Furthermore, enabling individuals to access social services through non-digital means will foster a more inclusive environment, as not all individuals may be at ease with or have the requisite technical resources to engage in such interactions.

SUPPORTIVE INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT | Efficiency in the delivery of the USS's digital services will also depend on the availability and adequacy of certain supporting infrastructure; these include mobile phone and internet usability, electricity, and financial services availability. It is critical to provide reliable and wide coverage of such infrastructures throughout the country in order to provide efficient digital services. Increasing digital financial services in low-income areas and partnerships within financial establishments would increase every citizen's access to the digital transformation of social protection services.

INTEGRATED INFORMATION SYSTEM | IIS is vital for the USS because it generally facilitates the implementation of the one-window principle due to the online accessibility of required data for the service providers and the service seekers. With an IIS in place, patients and customers can automatically acquire the required services without the need to repeatedly provide detailed information about their financial status or personal conditions. This not only helps in improving the user experience but also significantly decreases the average service time as the information is collected and disseminated across the different agencies and platforms. The implementation of such a system would lead to more efficient service delivery, minimizing bureaucratic delays and enhancing overall customer satisfaction.

In light of these considerations, which include the leapfrogging possibilities, the USS of Armenia will be able to benefit from digitalization while managing the risks in relation to social protection services, as well as improving their efficiency, accessibility,

and impact. Such an approach will allow the USS to develop a modern and efficient system of social protection in Armenia.

Conclusion

As is evident, the provision of social services through the digitalization of social protection systems is generally deemed cost-effective and convenient. On a global scale, the use of various digital tools assisted the implementation of social programs, especially in periods of crisis such as the COVID-19 gloom period. Data-driven decision-making, automated processes, and improved outreach have made services more efficient, but challenges such as institutional fragmentation, data protection, and exclusion risks for vulnerable groups remain significant.

In the case of Armenia's USS, the positive effects of digitalization are tangible and clear but contingent on strong legal frameworks, improved digital literacy, and reliable infrastructure. Reconciling the introduction of digital reforms entails political commitment and will, constant fiscal support, and the provision of targeted shrines for all citizens (Lv and Wu 787-800). When done right, technology can improve the services of social protection and can even help reach under-protected populations. These, however, pose a dilemma as addressing the challenges may address inequalities in the system and their apprehension leading to failure to adhere to the above goals. As articulated earlier, a strategic approach tailored to Armenia's social needs is essential for the USS to fulfill its potential for improved service delivery.

In conclusion, the efficacy of digitalization initiatives in social protection systems is significantly dependent on the congruence of political commitment, funding, and infrastructure advancement. Robust political commitment guarantees sustained prioritization and coordinated initiatives, whilst sufficient finance facilitates the execution, maintenance, and capacity enhancement necessary for successful digital transformation. Moreover, a strong infrastructure, encompassing dependable internet connection and digital literacy programs, is crucial for guaranteeing accessibility and inclusivity. Systematically addressing these criteria allows digitalization initiatives to attain increased efficiency, equality, and sustainability, hence improving the quality and accessibility of social protection services.

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ՄԱՐՏԻՆ ԱՂԱՋԱՆՅԱՆ

Երևանի պետական համալսարանի միջազգային հարաբերությունների ֆակուլտետի քաղաքագիտության ամբիոնի ասպիրանտ, ք. Երևան, Հայաստանի Հանրապետություն

Տվյալ հոդվածի նպատակն է ուսումնասիրել թվայնացման ազդեցությունը սոցիալական պաշտպանության համակարգերի վրա՝ ուշադրության դիտակետում ունենալով ծառայությունների տրամադրման կառուցակարգերի, արդյունավետության և մատչելիության բարելավման գործընթացներում թվայնացման դերը: Չնայած թվային փոխակերպման հստակ առավելություններին՝ սոցիալական ծառայությունների ամբողջական թվայնացումը դեռևս մարտահրավեր է զարգացող երկրների համար, իսկ առկա ոլորտային ուսումնասիրությունները ամբողջապես չեն բացահայտում այդ երևույթի բազմակողմանի ազդեցությունները: Այս հոդվածն անդրադառնում է այդ բացին՝ ընդգծելով և՛ առավելությունները, ինչպիսիք են բարձրացված արդյունավետությունն ու հասանելիությունը, և՛ մարտահրավերները՝ ներառյալ՝ թվային բացառման և տվյալների պաշտպանության խախտումների վտանգները:

Հետազոտության ընթացքում կիրառվել են անալիզի, սինթեզի, ինդուկցիայի և դեդուկցիայի մեթոդները: Օգտագործելով տվյալ մեթոդները՝ հոդվածը ընդգծում է թվային ծառայությունների մատուցման առավելություններն ու մարտահրավերները՝ հատուկ ուշադրություն դարձնելով ՀՀ միասնական սոցիալական ծառայությանը:

Հոդվածի նորույթը պայմանավորված է համապարփակ մոտեցմամբ, որով համակցվում են թվային փոխակերպման միջազգային միտումները ՄՍԾ-ի թվայնացման հրամայականների հետ: Այն վերհանում է թվայնացման գործընթացի

հաջողությունը պայմանավորող գործոնները, ինչպիսիք են իրավական բարեփոխումները, թվային գրագիտության բարձրացումը և ենթակառուցվածքների բարելավումը, որոնք պետք է ուղենիշ ծառայեն քաղաքականություն մշակողների և կիրարկողների համար:

Հիմնաբառեր՝ *թվային վերափոխում, սոցիալական ծառայությունների մատուցում, սոցիալական պաշտպանություն, միասնական սոցիալական ծառայություն (ՄՍԾ), հանրային հատվածի արդյունավետություն, տվյալահեն որոշումների կայացում, թվային ենթակառուցվածք, կառավարման տեղեկատվական համակարգեր (ԿՏՀ), ծառայությունների մատչելիություն:*

ЦИФРОВАЯ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯ КАК ГАРАНТ ПОВЫШЕНИЯ ЭФФЕКТИВНОСТИ ИНТЕГРИРОВАННЫХ СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ УСЛУГ

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Цель данной статьи - изучить влияние цифровизации на системы социальной защиты, акцентируя то, как она улучшает механизмы предоставления услуг, повышает их эффективность и доступность. Несмотря на явные преимущества цифровой трансформации, полная цифровизация социальных услуг по-прежнему является проблемой для развивающихся стран, при этом существующие отраслевые исследования не раскрывают в полной мере многогранные эффекты этого явления. В данной статье рассматривается этот пробел, подчеркиваются как преимущества, такие как повышение эффективности и доступности, так и проблемы, включая риски цифрового исключения и нарушений защиты данных.

В ходе исследования использовались методы анализа, синтеза, индукции и дедукции. С использованием данных методов в статье освещаются преимущества и проблемы предоставления цифровых услуг, уделяется особое внимание единой социальной службе РА.

Новизна статьи обусловлена ее комплексным подходом к проблеме, сочетающим международные тенденции цифровой трансформации с императивами цифровизации ЕСС. В нем подчеркиваются факторы, определяющие успех процесса цифровизации, такие как правовые реформы, повышение цифровой грамотности и улучшение инфраструктуры, которые должны служить ориентирами для лиц, принимающих решения, и исполнителей.

Ключевые слова: *цифровая трансформация, предоставление социальных услуг, социальная защита, единая социальная служба (ЕСС), эффективность государственного сектора, принятие решений на основе данных, цифровая инфраструктура, информационные системы управления (ИСУ), доступность услуг.*