

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LOCAL SELF- GOVERNANCE

Giorgi Toklikishvili . Irakli Kakhidze
Meri Kadagidze . Salome Sichinava

2020



This document is a resume for the following study: “Citizen Participation in the Implementation of Local Self-Governance”.

The study is prepared with the support of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) within the frames of the programme - Good Governance for Local Development, South Caucasus (GGLD).

The content and views expressed in this study are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of GIZ.

This study was developed by the Center for Training and Consultancy (CTC) and authored by Giorgi Toklikishvili, Irakli Kakhidze, Meri Kadagidze and Salome Sichinava.

CONTENT

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER I. CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO THE REGULATIONS AND PRACTICE OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION.....	2
CHAPTER II. MAIN CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO THE PROCESS OF COMMUNICATION WITH POPULATION AND INFORMATION DISSEMINATION.....	9
CHAPTER III. MAIN CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS IDENTIFIED IN THE PROCESS OF COLLABORATION BETWEEN MUNICIPALITIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS.....	11
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	15
CONCLUSION	15
RECOMMENDATIONS	16



INTRODUCTION

This document is a brief report for the following study - “Citizen Participation in the Implementation of Local Self-Governance”.¹

The study aimed to analyse the practice and forms of citizen participation in the implementation of local self-governance, communication of municipal bodies with local communities, and citizen participation in state programs of local significance. The objective of this study was to identify legal and practical challenges in the field of citizen participation and develop relevant recommendations.

The study placed particular emphasis on the analysis of forms of citizen participation in municipalities in relation to the so-called “quality criteria”:

- Inclusiveness;
- Consideration of gender issues;
- Online availability;
- Access to online media;
- Presence of guarantees for the protection of personal data;
- Presence of procedures to support accountability.

Legal basis for and practice of citizen participation were studied in 10 municipalities (**Batumi, Zugdidi, Ozurgeti, Gori, Kutaisi, Akhaltsikhe, Lagodekhi, Tsageri, Bolnisi, Tianeti**) as part of the study. Municipalities were selected based on the predefined methodology, as each municipality represented one of Georgia’s nine (9) regions as well as the Autonomous Republic of Adjara.

Within the frames of the study, interviews were conducted with persons of political positions in target municipalities, representatives of City halls’ unites of public relations and regional and local civil society organizations. Additionally, meetings with municipality population were conducted in focus group formats.

For the purposes of this study, citizen participation in the implementation of self-governance is defined as citizens’ individual or collective effort intended to introduce and support various initiatives in municipalities and advocate for the interests of individual groups to influence the process of decision-making and implementation of received decisions. This further includes the system for informing citizens, and processes and procedures of communication and accountability for the above-mentioned purpose.

¹ Full paper is available in Georgian at the following link: <https://www.ctc.org.ge/?public=participation-in-local-government>

Implementation of citizen participation forms envisaged by Local Self-Government Code (**hereinafter the Code**) as well as additional participation forms initiated by municipalities within their discretion were studied to describe and analyse the practice of citizen participation. Some of these forms were initiated based on expert and financial support provided by international partners and in accordance with duties and responsibilities undertaken as part of various local or international instruments.

The study discusses a total of ten (10) forms of citizen participation that currently function in subject municipalities. Various forms identified in studied municipalities as well as information about the practice of their usage can be viewed in the Table 1 below.

Participation forms envisaged by the Code

- general assembly of a settlement;
- petition;
- council of civic advisors;
- participation in the sessions of municipality Sakrebulo (Assembly) and the sessions of its commissions;
- accountability to the electorate.

Forms developed by municipalities

- participatory budgeting;
- public hall;
- two-level system of advisory bodies of municipality Sakrebulo (city of Batumi);
- council of gender equality and PwD council of municipality Sakrebulo;
- Open door sessions.

CHAPTER I. CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO THE REGULATIONS AND PRACTICE OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Challenges Related to Legal Regulations

Some forms of citizen participation implemented in practice by municipalities are not formalized by their legal acts. The mentioned approach arouses suspicions in terms of sustainability of participation forms, as far as their stability is thrown into doubt upon changes in the composition of municipal government.

Forms of citizen participation that are currently in effect in Georgia are largely consultative in nature, having weak influence on final decision-making process. These circumstances pose an important challenge for further development of citizen participation. If the usage of participatory instruments is not followed by real decisions,

population will be left disappointed or disillusioned, which will severely hamper the future development of participation practice. It is noteworthy that the Monitoring Committee of the Congress for Local and Regional Authorities² also emphasized this challenge.

Thus, it is pivotal to develop those forms of citizen participation, in which citizens will exercise strong influence on decision-making process. Legal acts of municipalities must clearly define the obligation for the implementation of decisions shaped in various forms of collaboration with population. Participatory budget can be viewed as the most remarkable among the mechanisms discussed, however, even in this case, project selection processes are sometimes obscure, and the real impact of electors on the ultimate result remains insignificant, which may well undermine trust in these mechanisms and reduce the number of initiatives.

The Code provides detailed regulations for citizen participation forms, which often leaves municipalities without discretion to adjust the participation forms to local conditions and needs. With regard to this, highly demanding requirements concerning the number of participants of a general assembly as well as the number of elector signatures necessary to convene the general assembly and submit a petition pose serious challenges. These requirements create important barriers to the practical usage of some forms of citizen participation.

A council, an advisory and collegial body that operates in various fields, is the most common form of citizen participation. The council, based on its specific nature, is a relatively closed mechanism that is available to narrow groups. Council activity in municipalities is largely limited to the format of narrow groups. Accordingly, a greater majority of municipality population has no access to information about council activity, while the results of this activity also remain ambiguous. The municipality population view councils more as municipal bodies rather than as mechanisms for citizen participation.

Several norms from the regulations of municipal Sakrebulo do not clearly stipulate procedures for citizens' attendance at or participation in council gatherings, which may involve risks of turning this mechanism into a bureaucratic barrier against citizens.

The issues of the openness of procedure that concerns the presentation of reports by the mayor and Sakrebulo members as well as informed participation of electors are among the most important challenges. Presentation of public reports is often merely a formal procedure attended only by specially "invited" persons and employees of municipal bodies. The practice of report publication prior to its presentation is also rare, which limits the opportunity for the informed engagement of electors within the process.

When it comes to civic engagement of vulnerable groups, the municipality policy mainly focuses on PwDs (persons with disabilities), while mechanisms of civic engagement

² Local and regional democracy in Georgia - Report, CG35(2018), 7 November 2018: https://search.coe.int/cm/pages/result_details.aspx?objectid=09000016808e551a

focused on other social groups are relatively rare. Besides, the municipal policy is oriented on financial support for PwDs and not so much on their social integration.

Those forms of civic engagement that are directed to citizen participation in the implementation of received decisions are practically underdeveloped in municipalities. Also, accountability procedure is either absent or very limited during the application of citizen participation forms, which is an important factor for the erosion of trust in participation mechanisms.

Challenges of Practice

To establish citizen participation as an efficient instrument of governance, it is crucially important that both the municipal government and the population correctly perceived and understood its significance. The study reveals that the bodies of municipal government tend to underestimate the positive meaning of citizen participation. Besides, local population does not seem to have enough awareness of the need of civic engagement as well. Accordingly, there is not enough trust in citizen participation process, and so the level of civic activity is low, which may also indicate to the poor level of trust in local self-government in general.

As assessed by representatives of civil society and citizens, in several cases, local governments do not fully understand the importance and necessity of citizen participation, while decision makers and part of administrative staff charge citizens themselves with the responsibility for the low level of civic engagement.

Only a minority of local government representatives believe that the development of participation forms by the mayor and Sakrebulo is of crucial importance when society is passive, and, therefore, they agree to shifting the whole burden of responsibility onto citizens.

Application and development of citizen participation mechanisms are not institutionalized parts of the governance system of local governments. The experience of subject municipalities demonstrates that, following the change of political context or decision-makers, good practice of citizen participation was either altered or entirely cancelled.

Interviews with population or representatives of civil society reveal that population's poor motivation and low interest in participation is frequently conditioned not only by social, economic or cultural factors, but also by inflated expectations and subsequent disillusioning experience. According to them, representatives of self-governments create unrealistic expectations in population about what problems can be solved within their competence. Accordingly, the population is not given an opportunity to make informed decisions, which brings about undesirable results. Further, there are cases when representatives of local self-governments are known for attempts to lobby projects of their choice within the frame of various initiatives as they are aided by officials from the

Mayor's Office. Such occurrences create additional obstacles for citizens, and, as a result, the latter are left with negative experience related to engagement, and their motivation for participation also wanes.

Municipalities are not aware of the efficiency of diverse forms of citizen participation, and their judgement is based on subjective and personal views instead of evidence-based statistical and qualitative analysis.

Recommendations

- It is of great significance to raise awareness of the private and social value of citizen participation among representatives of local governments, including persons with political positions, representatives of Mayor's office, members of advisory and collegial bodies and administrative staff engaged in communication with population. It is pivotal to ensure the sustainable process of building population's trust in local self-governmental institutions.
- Municipalities should ensure that citizen participation mechanisms are regulated by normative acts. The approach that implies the usage of certain forms of citizen participation without stipulated procedures should be limited. This will, at a minimum, create necessary conditions and opportunities for the development of the sustainable system of citizen participation, which will be less dependent on the change of personnel or staff of municipal bodies.
- Barriers formed by the requirements that concern the high involvement of electors for developing a petition, convening Sakrebulo meetings, and conducting the activity of general assembly hinder citizen participation and should be, therefore, subject to reasonable reductions.
- Forms of citizen participation that are designed to support the participation of citizens in the implementation of received decisions are practically underdeveloped in municipalities. Thus, it is desirable to develop and implement relevant instruments.
- As an advisory and collegial body, the council is the most widespread form of citizen participation, however, it is also a relatively closed tool available only to narrow groups. Accordingly, it is important to form councils based on as open and inclusive procedures as possible to build public trust in them and ensure the opportunity for considering the interests of various social groups in decision-making. In this process, it is recommended to implement the procedure for publicly convening a person to the position of a council member, and / or use associations of representatives of the relevant sector.

- It would be expedient to reduce the proportion of public officials in the composition of the council (advisory and collegial body), otherwise such bodies will hardly serve as the mechanism of citizen participation and become more “bureaucratic”.
- Public trust in and public awareness of advisory and collegial bodies (the councils) is low. Accordingly, regulation of these forms of citizen participation necessarily requires the definition of specific procedures of openness and public accountability, which may include the following: ensuring the openness of council gatherings, existence of opportunities for asking questions or expressing views at council meetings, including through electronic forms. The council must be obliged to present the population with a report of its activity from time to time.
- It is important to consider the accountability procedure of officials of relevant municipalities to advisory and collegial bodies (councils). More precisely, municipal bodies must be obliged to present a report on the fulfilment of the council’s recommendations and provide explanations periodically, which would help to increase the council’s role, civic engagement in it, and motivation for activism.
- Petition is an important mechanism for civic engagement in the activity of a municipality’s population, which ensures the representation and protection of their interests. The analysis of the existing practice indicates that the usage of petitions is more common in those municipalities that allow the submission of the petition in electronic formats. The mentioned tendency emphasizes the need for the implementation of electronic petition in other municipalities. Besides, it is important to stipulate the electronic petition procedure in municipality acts and provide guarantees for the protection of personal data.
- Municipalities that have a stipulated obligation to publish report prior to public meetings with electors offer good practice of accountability of the mayor and Sakrebulo members. The implementation of this practice is recommended in municipalities, and it should be certified by Sakrebulo’s Regulations. It is important to develop mechanisms for the reception of electors’ feedback in the process of accountability, including, for example, questions, comments, or remarks in relation to the published report during and after the presentation to consider them within the follow-up work and activities.
- Procedures for the attendance at and participation in Sakrebulo sessions should be stipulated by Sakrebulo Regulations in as clear a manner as possible, and they should not allow the limitation of these rights of citizens with bureaucratic mechanisms. Moreover, precedents of good practice identified in some municipalities, which provide the opportunity for the electronic participation in

Sakrebulo sessions as well as electronic submission of feedback, require formalization through normative acts. This would ensure more guarantees for the sustainability of this practice.

- Participatory budget is one of the most efficient mechanisms of citizen participation identified as part of the study. For further development and popularization of participatory budget, it is crucially important to develop public trust in it, which should be ensured by increasing the role of citizens in decision-making processes and improving the accountability system for the implementation of received decisions. Besides, it is desirable that participatory budget was available to the population of self-governing communities in all municipal settlements in electronic and other alternative formats.
- The practice for the regulation of participatory budget, in which all processes and procedures are defined by the order of a mayor or a decision of advisory and collegial body, needs to change. The participatory budget procedure should be defined by Sakrebulo's ordinance, which is a legally and institutionally appropriate approach. In this case, inclusion of ideas presented as part of the participatory budget process within the actual budget may become obligatory for both the mayor and Sakrebulo, which provides further guarantees for the establishment of more sustainable system of participatory budgeting.
- When it comes to the civic engagement of vulnerable groups, municipal policy requires substantial amendments. Municipal policy should be oriented not only on the social assistance for these groups but also on the development of mechanisms for increasing their social engagement.
- It would be expedient if municipalities developed methodology for analysing the efficiency of citizen participation forms, which would significantly support the refinement of the existing and development of new forms of citizen participation in accordance with local conditions and needs of population.

Please view the major examples of good practice of citizen participation identified in municipalities as part of the study in Table N2.

Table N2. Major examples of good practice identified in municipalities³

N	Participation Forms	Batumi	Gori	Ozurgeti	Zugdidi	Kutaisi	Lagodekhi	Bolnisi	Akhaltsikhe	Tsageri	Tianeti
		1.	General assembly of a settlement (over 2000 electors)								
2.	Stipulated procedure for electronic petitions ⁴										
3.	Number of electors necessary for the initiation of a petition < 1%										
4.	Open rule for staffing the mayor's advisor board ⁵										
5.	Convene special sessions of Sakrebulo with 1% of electors ⁶										
6.	Participation in Sakrebulo sessions in an electronic form										
7.	Publication of mayor's / Sakrebulo member's report prior to the session										
8.	Board of PwDs										
9.	Gender quota for gender equality board;										
10.	Composition of the public hall is confirmed ⁷										
11.	Two-level advisory body of the Sakrebulo										
12.	Participatory budget										

³ Examples of good practice in municipality in the field of citizen participation are depicted in the Table above. The main emphasis here falls on the existence of relevant regulation and not on the practice of its usage.

⁴ Websites of certain municipalities allow for the submission of electronic petitions; however, they do not have stipulated procedures adapted for the submission of electronic petitions.

⁵ There is a stipulated procedure for the selection of candidates, which enables the representatives of civil sector to introduce candidates of their own.

⁶ The Code establishes 1% as the minimum percentage of electors necessary to convene special sessions of assemblies. Municipalities, which have not increased this minimum number, have retained higher levels of availability of this procedure to electors.

⁷ Regulations of all target municipalities envisage the creation of a consulting body of Sakrebulo, called the public hall; however, its practical usage is extremely limited; therefore, it is this issue of the practical usage of this additional form that is considered good practice and not its mere existence (the form which is not envisaged by the Code).

CHAPTER II. MAIN CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO THE PROCESS OF COMMUNICATION WITH POPULATION AND INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

The study identified main challenges related to the processes of communication with local population and information dissemination by self- governments.

Ensure proactive publication of information

Majority of municipalities have approved standards for proactive publication of public information as well as for the submission of electronic requests for public information. Regardless of this, the analysis of the actual practice in the target municipalities demonstrates that, in a number of cases, municipalities fail to disseminate information (which should be proactively published) in a timely manner and in forms accessible to citizens, while the publication of protocols and agenda of sessions of advisory boards of municipal bodies are especially problematic.

Weak practice of planning communication campaigns

Interviews with parties involved revealed that a larger part of existing approaches to the communication with population is oriented more on unilateral dissemination of information than on the enhancement of feedback reception system. Notwithstanding the fact that the Regulations of municipality Sakrebulo stipulate the obligation of studying public opinion on a variety of important issues, apparently, there is no systemic approach to receiving feedback from population or studying public opinion.

Moreover, mechanisms used by municipalities to inform citizens do not consider differentiated approaches to various target groups. For example, websites are not adapted to the needs of persons with different abilities. Besides, in certain cases, published information is prepared in a language that is too professional or hardly intelligible to citizens, neither are budget and other important documents easily understandable and comprehensible.

It is also noteworthy that even more limited amount of information is available to citizens with little or no access to internet. In such cases, printed announcements, information disseminated by local newspapers or television channels are primary sources of information. Even though the telephone communication is one of the easiest methods to reach citizens, this practice [of telephone communication] (e.g., hotline) is underdeveloped or absent in many subject municipalities.

Communication forms developed by municipalities should help each citizen make informed decisions. It is also important to inspire citizens with a feeling that they are active participants of their municipality's social and political life. Achieving this is difficult considering that the existing forms of communication are less oriented on raising citizens' awareness and knowledge of their rights and abilities.

Information disseminated about various forms of citizen participation mainly includes major dates (call for projects, starting and end dates of voting processes, selection of projects,

identification of winners), while other data is rarely provided for public access. The amount and frequency of information for citizens further decreases after decisions are made, which fosters the opinion that the engagement of population “*is limited only to signatures / voting*”. This, on the one hand, weakens the interest of citizens in processes that take place in municipalities and, on the other hand, disposes them negatively toward presenting new initiatives and the idea of participation itself.

Technical problems with electronic platforms

Websites in most municipalities fail to function properly. The solution of this problem is hindered by insufficient competence of relevant employees and lack of resources allocated to information and communication campaign in the local budget. Based on the cases of subject municipalities, it can be argued that the electronic platforms are often created with local or international aid, however, they are hardly ever developed or improved. All the above mentioned further reduces the level of information dissemination among population as well as their motivation for participation.

Recommendations

- To enhance the current practice of communication, municipalities should establish a high standard for the proactive publication of information on issues of public interest with due consideration of the personal data protection.
- Practice of communication with citizens must be, in the first place, oriented on citizens’ interests, abilities and needs. Therefore, it is important to develop a communication strategy and an action plan with increased public availability of information as their key priority. This includes both the adaptation of existing mechanisms (especially, adjustment of electronic platforms and services tailored to the needs of persons with different abilities) and the establishment of alternative means of information dissemination. It is also important to provide citizens with information in a format that is easily understandable to them, including video instructions, visual materials, and infographics.
- It is important that citizens felt themselves as active and not passive participants in the process of communication with municipality representatives. To this purpose, it is necessary to refine forms for receiving feedback from population and establish the practice of analysing the efficiency of received feedback and other mechanisms of citizen participation.
- In several cases, low interest of citizens in participatory processes is associated with the fact that possible positive outcomes of participation are not evident. Accordingly, it is pivotal to ensure that the results achieved by citizen participation were clearly represented and disseminated through social or other types of events and campaigns.

Demonstration of positive results and exemplary precedents of citizen participation should be among the key messages of the rhetoric of local self-governments. Apart from that, it is important that local media outlets covered the citizens' positions and views more frequently as part of various political and social television and radio projects.

- To improve the practice of communication with citizens and retain the sustainability of implemented electronic or alternative communication means, it is important that the municipalities ensured the consideration of necessary financial resources in their budget for the expenses of electronic platform management and the development of technical skills of human resources.



CHAPTER III. MAIN CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS IDENTIFIED IN THE PROCESS OF COLLABORATION BETWEEN MUNICIPALITIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Lack of readiness for collaboration between municipalities and civil society organizations. Collaboration practice between local governments and civil society organizations in subject municipalities is influenced by both social and economic environment of municipalities and personal attitudes of stakeholders, their political views and dispositions.

Representatives of local government consider the existence of civil society organizations important, however, they also tend to have an obscure understanding of the role of civil society organizations in the development of self-governance and civic awareness. In certain cases, expectations of municipalities are too high or incompatible with abilities of civil society organizations, especially in terms of attracting additional financial resources to municipalities.

Additionally, self-governments are not always open for collaboration with local organizations. Personal attitudes or political contexts influence them to view local civil society organizations more as opposing sides than potential partners. The same disposition is noticed among some of civil society organizations, when any initiative introduced by self-government is discussed only in a political context and with contradiction, which ultimately results in the formation of a non-collaborative environment for all parties.

Regardless of the fact that municipalities often convene representatives of non-governmental organizations to various advisory bodies, they usually make up a minority, finding it difficult to defend their position. In individual cases, municipalities are trying to convene representatives of organizations that are less critically disposed to them. That same tendency is apparent in case of work on joint projects or in case of initiatives implemented with co-funding. Such selective attitude puts organizations in very unequal conditions and prevents their collaboration in the process of planning and implementing long-term campaigns.

Absence of local specialized community and non-governmental organizations, and challenges associated with the development of existing organizations. Active involvement of community and non-governmental organizations as well as their activity implemented in

relation to participatory democracy are among key factors to support both the refinement of existing participatory forms and implementation of new mechanisms. Accordingly, municipalities where community and non-governmental organizations are not formed or developed face more challenges in terms of open governance and practice of citizen participation; for example, as part of this study this problem was clearly identified while analysing the case of Tianeti Municipality.

The second and no less important issue is that even when community and non-governmental organizations function in municipalities, it is very rare that their main course of activity included the facilitation of participatory democracy and enhancement of various groups in this regard. Apart from the social and political context, this is also conditioned by low capacities of organizations, especially in terms of attracting funds and working on long-term strategic goals.

Another important challenge that organizations working on municipality or regional levels face is the lack of financial resources and unstable funding. Grants provided by donors are major sources of funding for these organizations, and they usually have to adjust their projects to the conditions of announced competitions to obtain or retain such funds, which hinders the implementation of initiatives focused on long-term goals.

Apart from that, ineffective planning and inaccurate implementation of advocacy campaigns, which, along with the deficiency of financial resources, are conditioned by the inadequacy of relevant experience and skills (such as the usage of electronic resources and social media), forming yet another challenge for local organizations.

Described challenges are especially damaging for the development of organizations with little experience, which do not have adequate human and organizational capital to obtain funding and conduct their activity independently.

Recommendations

- To enhance the practice of collaboration between civil society organizations and municipalities, which serves as the major cornerstones of participatory culture, it is necessary for both parties to understand the value of collaboration in a proper manner. To this purpose, it is necessary that the parties agreed on the key principles of partnership and protection of collaboration process from the negative influence of political processes.
- To support the development of civil society organizations, it is important to enhance their capacity in terms of communication with citizens, attracting funding sources and implementation of social or advocacy campaigns.
- To promote civil society organizations and increase the level of citizen participation in their activity, it is important that the organizations developed more active mechanisms for communication with target groups and ensured the proactive dissemination of activity results and achievements.

- To encourage youth participation and raise their interest in self-government's activity, it is important that civil society organizations placed more focus on projects, which will enable them to work with young people (even if they change the place of residence), use their social capital and competences to improve their own activity and enrich it with contemporary approaches.
- To improve civic activism and participation practice, accent should be made on the development of such mechanisms that will push citizens toward self-organization. For example, municipalities, in partnership with local or international organizations, may set the funding of such social, educational and cultural projects as their priority, which will help to establish community centres, initiative groups, and social enterprises.

SWOT Analysis of Citizen Participation

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Additional forms of citizen participation are being established and developed in municipalities (e.g., participatory budgeting, councils for gender equality and PwDs, etc.); Municipalities, within their discretion, are improving the availability of forms envisaged by the Code (e.g., implementation of electronic petition, lowering the boundary for petition submission to 0.5%); Citizens show increasing interest in participation forms that enable them to participate directly and advocate for their own interests (e.g., participatory budgeting); Existence of precedents that evidence the implementation of joint initiatives by civil sector and municipalities; In a number of municipalities - the existence of active public organizations and independent media outlets, which relatively increases the awareness of participation forms as well as inclusivity and transparency of the participation process; Skills, knowledge, and experience obtained as part of various participation forms; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participation as a value and its particular benefit, both individual and public (collective), is not shared properly by local government and citizens; Local government is largely accountable to central government and less to its citizens; Lack of systemic and complex approach to the implementation of participation forms by municipalities; Lack of experience for planning and managing citizen participation process in municipalities; Lack of transparency, accountability and fairness in participation policy and processes in municipalities; Ensure financial and administrative sustainability of mechanisms for communication with citizens, encourage and support them; Flaws in legal and municipal Regulations on citizen participation; Nihilism and low motivation among population, especially, among young people and vulnerable groups;

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 📄 Existence of successful cases of participation in various contexts in municipalities, which enables the dissemination and expansion of knowledge and experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 📄 Low access to internet (especially in settlements distanced from the administrative centres); 📄 Low organisational capacities of local NGOs and their dependence on donors; 📄 Lack of capacities of local NGOs in terms of planning and managing advocacy campaigns; 📄 Weak practice of experience sharing among municipalities; 📄 Low capacities of local media outlets for monitoring participation process and ensuring multilateral and unbiased coverage of processes; 📄 Absence of experience of municipalities in the assessment of participation practice.
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 📄 Decentralization strategy of the Government for 2020-2025, one of the goals of which is to support high level of civic engagement in local self-governments; 📄 Support by international and donor organizations to increase transparency and engagement in municipalities (e.g., new GGLD program of GIZ, USAID initiative - strengthening of local self-governments, etc.); 📄 There are systems for external recognition and the identification of good practice of municipalities: LSG index, NALAG best practice approach; 📄 Development of unified system for managing municipal services by the Agency of Municipal Service Development and creation of basic conditions for electronic governance; 📄 2021 local elections – window for new opportunities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 📄 Low level of political and financial independence of municipalities; 📄 Weak social capital; 📄 Deterioration of social and economic conditions in the country; 📄 Change in priorities of main donors in times of the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Important steps have been taken in recent years to ensure citizen participation in the implementation of self-governance in Georgia. Regulation of aspects of citizen participation by the Code must be noted as particularly noteworthy, which is also positively evaluated in 2018 Report on Local and Regional Democracy of the Council of Europe's Congress for Local and Regional Authorities.

It is notable that the legislative regulations provided an incentive for the development of the existing and the introduction of new mechanisms of citizen participation in municipalities. There are successful examples characterized with innovative approaches and high level of engagement in decision-making processes.

Regardless of the positive changes mentioned above, important challenges persist. For citizen participation to be established as an efficient instrument of governance, it is of critical importance that both municipal governments and population had accurate understanding of its importance. The study demonstrates that municipal governance bodies do not properly appreciate the positive importance of citizen participation, and, accordingly, it is sometimes viewed as an artificial "democratic supplement" and not as an efficient instrument of governance. It is hardly enough to be merely aware of the fact that citizen participation is, in the first place, a governance instrument, and it may serve as a means for achieving, at the very least, personal political ambitions and successful political career. Besides, like municipal government bodies, local population does not clearly perceive the need for citizen participation, and, accordingly, there is not sufficient trust in citizen participation process while the level of civic activity is quite low as well.

Judging from the above-mentioned, forms of citizen participation sometimes exist only because they are obligatory by law, while the effect of their application is rather meagre. Also, there is little will and readiness to base the usage of forms of citizen participation on as open, inclusive and sustainable system as possible.

It is also noteworthy that a majority of citizen participation mechanisms identified as part of the study are consultive in their form. They have weak influence on final decision-making process and do not create favourable circumstances for further development of citizen participation. Trust in citizen participation will not increase and the civic initiative will not develop if the population does not believe that their activity will bring actual results. This conclusion identified as part of the study coincides with the position expressed in 2018 report on Local and Regional Democracy in Georgia by the Council of Europe's Monitoring Committee, according to which if the usage of citizen participation mechanisms is not followed with actual decisions, it will cause the disappointment of population, which is harmful for the future development of citizen

participation practice. Thus, the main challenge in the field of citizen participation is the potential stagnation of the tendency of positive changes and related regress expected in the future.

This study indicates that there are successful examples of citizen participation in Georgia's municipalities, which may provide an incentive for positive changes. It is to be considered that the existing successful examples are generally based on innovative approaches and active usage of electronic technologies. However, these positive changes are new and "vulnerable" as demonstrated by the fact that they are not usually based on formalized procedures, or the level of their legal formalization is low. Accordingly, in case of changes in the composition of municipal governments, the retainment of good practice becomes doubtful.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improvement of the existing practice of citizen participation:

- For further development of the practice of citizen participation in Georgia's municipalities, the extent to which effective steps will be taken in the country towards the independence of local self-government will be of crucial importance. Only strong and independent municipalities will be able to obtain public trust, motivate citizens and include them in local decisions. Therefore, timely and effective implementation of the reform of governance decentralization by the Government of Georgia with the engagement of all stakeholders is one of the major recommendations.
- Support the recognition of good practice of municipalities and development of existing (LSG index, NALAG best practice program) and new benchmarking systems, which will help municipalities to exchange information about successful participation forms.
- Municipalities should regulate important issues of citizen participation with Sakrebulo's normative acts, which will be obligatory for fulfilment by municipality's mayor and Sakrebulo members. These regulations should include clear norms on participation forms (mechanisms), procedures, duties and responsibilities of engaged parties, municipality's response to results (outcomes) and accountability to citizens.
- Municipalities should ensure as wide and flexible variety of citizen participation forms as possible, which will enable citizens to make positive influence in a timely and effective manner on their residential environment, and easily perceive the connection between engagement and reaped benefits.
- Municipalities should ensure that the citizens developed trust in participation processes. For this purpose, it is necessary that people felt as equal parties – partners of local governments in the process of local governance, possessed information and saw the

effects of participation and its outcomes. Accordingly, municipalities should develop efficient mechanisms (including electronic ones) to ensure information availability (disseminating, obtaining) and sustainable system for the accountability of municipality representatives. Local governments should not raise public expectations too high of those decisions for which resources will be limited or consensus between opposing interests will be difficult to achieve.

- It is important that municipalities held open communication about the distribution of budget resources across territorial units (settlements / districts) or beneficiary groups and ensured the transparency at all stages of budgeting process to engender public trust. Feeling of injustice in society should be reduced to the minimum.
- During the planning of municipality participation process, municipalities should pay special attention to the identification and engagement of those groups (for example, PwDs, ethnic, religious, and other types of minorities) that are little involved or not involved at all in municipality life. Besides, wherever possible, engagement of such groups is better through their integration in the process of participation.
- To develop participation practice, municipalities should use electronic means (including mobile application platforms) with increasing frequency along with traditional forms. This, on the one hand, will increase the access of electronic platforms (especially in those settlements where the availability of internet is limited) and enable people to make choices about the participation in municipal processes with forms that are more desirable or suited to them, and, on the other, encourage the engagement of young people.
- Equal engagement of women and men should be taken into consideration during the identification of strategic and budget priorities of a municipality to ensure the adjustment of social, infrastructural and other projects to gender requirements.
- Municipalities should develop policy to encourage young people (including schoolchildren) to participate in the implementation of local self-governance, which will create good ground for the establishment of civil society in the future and ensure the increase of trust in local institutions.
- Municipalities should collaborate with and encourage non-governmental or community organizations in all possible ways as their major partners in the process of implementation of participation practice. Collaboration forms may include the following: 1) search for resources (funds, expertise, innovative decisions); 2) joint projects; 3) co-funding of civic education and social projects; 4) facilitation of various meetings; 5) information dissemination; 6) mobilization of specific interest groups, etc.
- Regulations defined by normative acts of the state, which limit the municipality's discretion and create bureaucratic barriers for citizens to use participatory mechanisms

should be abolished, for example, the high percentage of electors required to convene and conduct the general assembly of a settlement.

Development of Municipality's Capacity

- To share participation as a value and develop organizational structure, it is important to implement long-term awareness-raising programs for municipality management and employees who are in direct communication with citizens. This may include trainings, seminars, conferences, sharing of good examples and practices, including using special electronic platforms. It is necessary to focus attention on engagement as an essential and important instrument for the development of democratic society and creation of social capital.
- Develop the competencies of specialists responsible for relevant activity, including the employees of administrative and public relations departments in the following directions: a) research: processing information, analysis, and visualisation; b) public relations: develop, implement, and evaluate mechanisms of communication oriented on various target groups; c) manage social media; d) computer technologies and basic skills of website management; e) English language.
- Capacity building of local governments in obtaining, processing, analysing, and ensuring the public availability of local data. This information, considering the legislative requirement for the protection of personal data, should be proactively published in a simple and eligible form, which will increase the participation level and respective benefits.
- The existing electronic platform should be revised, inner systems for electronic management should be optimized and adapted for PwDs, relevant human and financial resources appropriate for electronic platform management and technical maintenance should be considered in local budgets.
- Inclusion of young people in activities that can be implemented with distant and half-time engagement, e. g., website management and technical optimization, preparation of printed and electronic resources necessary for communication campaigns, and research; also, training / requalification of municipality staff in the above-listed directions.
- Municipalities should create a comprehensive communication strategy, which will ensure access to citizens and reception of feedback in permanent mode through e-mail, SMS, social media, advertisements, door to door principle, informational workshops / seminars, etc.

Development capacity of citizens, civil society organizations and media

- The level of public awareness of important social, economic, environmental and other data related to municipality / community development should increase. To make informed and effective decisions, citizens should have access to such data, both through contemporary technological (electronic) means and maximum simplified procedures for obtaining public information from municipalities.
- It is necessary to promote activities that contribute to the development of social capital on the ground; these may include educational programs (e. g., for youth) about active citizenship, community development, leadership, advocacy, municipality's role and competencies. It is important that citizens could perceive the connection between engagement and the personal and public benefits received.
- The stronger and more diverse the non-governmental sector is, the greater / higher the engagement level. As municipalities vary according to the number, profile, development level and experience of civil society organizations, their needs are also different. Despite this, the necessity of capacity enhancement is evident in the following directions: organizational development and strategic planning (to better identify target groups and their needs), skills of communication and collaboration with local government, target groups and civil society organizations.
- In order to conduct the participatory process fairly and transparently it is necessary to develop the capacity of the local media in the field of the essence of engagement, its importance and forms, municipality competences and monitoring instruments.

Practice of Participation in State Programs and Funds

- State programs and funds must be actively used to stimulate citizen participation at the local level. However it is of vital importance to maintain the municipality's discretion over the opportunity to adjust specific decisions to local conditions and needs.
- State policy in the area of supporting citizen participation on a local level should be based on the priority of encouraging municipalities and developing local capacities. During the usage of state programs or funds, the increase of limit of available financial resources should be considered as an encouragement mechanism for those municipalities that will have stipulated mechanisms for citizen participation in project selection and will ensure its implementation in practice; also, advantage may be given to the usage of innovative methods of citizen participation (e. g., electronic technologies).