

CHALLENGES TO THE CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE LOCAL SELF-GOVERNANCE **POLICY PAPER**



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INTRODUCTION: KEY CHALLENGES

Modern forms of democratic governance are based on the public participation principle. Development objectives require good governance, which implies citizen participation in the governance process. Currently, we are witnessing a trend of disenchantment and alienation among politics and the public. Politicians are perceived as a group of elected officials, though distanced and separated from the public, to govern and solve public issues for a specific period of time. This is an increasingly troublesome tendency in Georgian society too, demonstrated in the latest massive survey, «Citizen Satisfaction with Public Services in Georgia», conducted by the Georgian research company ACT with the assistance from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Georgia, Swiss Cooperation Office for the South Caucasus (SCO) and the Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC). The survey research shows the citizens' attitudes towards the public services provided by the central and the local governments. Some tendencies revealed by the survey requires comprehensive analysis.

Local self-government bodies should be accessible for citizens. According to the survey results, citizens' appeal to local government organs is declining (2013 – 20%, 2015 – 18%, 2017 – 16%). At the same time, 90 percent of the surveyed population hasn't ever participated in the civic activity.¹ Similar conclusions are drawn from one of the most large-scale and dynamic research in the realm “*Self-government Index*”, elaborated in the framework of the project “For Open and Accountable Local Government - National Assessment of Transparency and Public Participation of Georgian Municipalities”, implemented by the Centre for Training and Consultancy (CTC), Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI) and Management Systems Development Center (MSDC) with the Open Society Georgia Foundation's (OSGF) financial support.² According to the study, in the process of budget planning, an absolute majority of municipalities, doesn't consider citizen engagement programs. In 2019, citizen engagement and local governments' accountability ranking improved maximum by only 5 percent, compared to 2017, which demonstrates a very slow progression dynamic.

- To recap, the tendencies mentioned above indicate that the local self-government can't exercise effective local governance in which:
- Society is consolidated and self-organized;
- More effective and citizen-oriented decisions are made;
- Resources are allocated fairly;
- The political, economic and social environment is stable;

1 https://www.ge.undp.org/content/georgia/ka/home/library/democratic_governance/citizen-satisfaction-with-public-services-in-georgia--2017.html

2 <http://www.lsgindex.org/ge/pages/about/us>

- Citizens self-identify and unite to serve the needs of their community (in their neighborhood, town, or a city);
- The risk of conflicts over corruption or ethnic or other divides is mitigated.

Naturally, the list is not exhaustive.

In the contemporary models of public administration, elaboration and institutionalization of effective citizen participation instruments are the major prerequisites for good governance. The good governance architecture is based on the citizen participation fundament. The Covid-19 pandemic has put massive pressure on many spheres of life, including governance. Georgia, as the whole world, has to co-exist with the pandemic-related restrictions and adjust accordingly. In the times of social distancing any direct communication with the administrative organs are risky and therefore, limited. Pandemic also weakens the political will to engage the public and shrinks already existing spaces and platforms for citizen participation, which is so foundational for local governance. On March 12, 2020, the government of Georgia issued the order #529 **“Defining Special Measures for Public Institutions to Prevent the Possible Spread of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)”**, followed by the relevant legislative acts applying to the local government bodies - City Halls and Sakrebulos.^{3/4} Consequently, since spring 2020, in late fall and at the beginning of winter, the situation has been similarly challenging in Georgian municipalities:

- » Representative and executive bodies of local government have switched to remote work. This decision was made despite the fact that digital and distance communication channels within the municipalities aren’t properly developed. Namely, internet penetration remains quite limited in Georgia;
- » In their traditional format, citizen participation mechanisms envisaged by the law (neighborhood council meetings, Mayor’s Citizen Advisory Council, Mayor’s or Sakrebulo members’ annual report hearings, Sakrebulo’s and local council’s meetings) implies social interaction unattainable in times of pandemic;
- » In November, after the municipality Mayor introduces the draft budget to the Sakrebulo, the one is mandated to conduct the public discussion on the draft budget. Nowadays, considering pandemic-related risks and regulations, such public gathering can’t be hosted;

3 <https://mestia.gov.ge/ge/sakrebulos-tavmjdomaris-brzaneba-korona-virusis-covid-19-prevenცი-uli-gonisziebebis-sheaxeb>

4 https://drive.google.com/file/d/11fwviR46siD7z2k4P9IXMb_1rleFU4iF/view

- » Due to pandemic, local governments are mainly focused on providing social assistance to its citizens. Consequently, anyways the low-level political will to engage citizens and exercise transparent governance principles is further diminished.

Since the fall of 2019, with the funding of the Government of Georgia, the World Bank (WB) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia has started implementing the unified electronic services program in Georgian municipalities. Around twenty municipalities are already enrolled in the program.^{5/6} Notably, the program has significant setbacks and limitations:

- » The system is oriented to simplify the delivery of municipal services and does not consider the needs for citizen engagement in the local government;
- » Authorization in the digital systems causes some obstructions for citizens. Namely, full access to the application requires ID verification;
- » So far 21 municipalities are enrolled in the electronic services program, running in the test regime. As the system is not fully functional yet, its assessment would be premature.

Frequently, citizen participation in local governance is perceived as just citizen's right to elect and be elected in the local or national government bodies. Such understanding is obsolete, incomplete and incompatible for democratic governance. Democratic principles of local government imply regular, routine communication with its citizens. As the local municipalities should supposedly have the closest connection with the public, the widening gap between citizens and the local government bodies is especially concerning. Against the backdrop, the big picture is not utterly pessimistic, especially if we consider that:

- In the era of internet prevalence, technological progress and its penetration in everyday life are extremely rapid. 5G internet technology is emerging to address pandemic-related issues;
- The modern market economy supports the emergence of internet-based distance communication channels between consumers and suppliers;

5 <https://mrdi.gov.ge/ka/press-center/სიახლეები%20&%20ღონისძიებები/საქართველოს-მუნიციპალიტეტებში.html>

6 <https://ms.gov.ge/profile>

- The private sector is pioneering the creation and institutionalization of new technologies and the governance sector just follows their lead. New operation systems the public sector utilizes are actually borrowed from the private sector.

Considering the aforementioned circumstances, there is enough evidence to infer that the future of modern self-government is digital.

Enough time has already passed to assess how the developed democracies have responded to local governance challenges posed by the pandemic: it is explicit that the most effective mechanism to ensure citizen participation in local political processes is the electronic form of participation. Transfer of public administration and governance to the digital space and more decentralization are crucial.^{7/8}

GOALS OF THE POLICY PAPER

The goals of the policy paper could be defined as follows:

- Spur a deeper discussion among politicians, administrators, citizens and other participants of the governance process on challenges pandemic posed and exacerbated in the sphere of local governance;
- Encourage the birth of the new local governance vision based on the principles of citizen participation.

ASSESSMENT OF THE CURRENT SITUATION AND SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS

According to the Georgian legislation, the following platforms are available for citizens to participate in local governance:

- Neighborhood/community councils;
- Citizen advisory board of the Mayor's Office;

7 https://apolitical.co/en/solution_article/citizen-participation-has-to-be-the-new-norm-after-covid

8 <https://www.uclg.org/en/media/news/local-democracy-aftermath-covid-19-pandemic>

- Petition;
- Open sitting of Sakrebulo and its commissions;
- Public hearing of the report by a mayor or a Sakrebulo member;

There are also a number of other positive examples of participation as well:

- Participatory budgeting;
- Citizen survey in the process of drafting policy priorities;
- LAG/Local Action Groups, intersectoral planning and development groups;
- Community initiative unities and co-operations;
- Youth advisory councils.

Regulated by the law and encouraged by the positive experience in other countries, new forms and citizen participation models should be introduced and institutionalized. The Organic Law of Georgia, Local Self Government Code and its Article #85 reads that ***“to ensure citizen participation and transparency of decision making in the local self-government, municipal bodies and their authorities shall be obliged to take measures to ensure material-technical conditions for citizen engagement and inform the population of the Municipality of their activities and on the possibility of citizens to participate in the exercise of local self-government”***. In the same article, the 5th point reads that ***“a municipality Sakrebulo may, by a relevant decision, extend the list of information stipulated by paragraph 3 of this article that is subject to mandatory publication and/or public announcement, and/or proactive publication”***.

On the one hand, these articles mandate the municipality to create relevant organizational and material conditions for citizen participation. On the other hand, it provides the opportunity to introduce and practice new citizen participation models that are not already envisaged in the law but do not contradict it.

After defining local government bodies’ responsibilities and opportunities, it’s important to identify major principles that will increase citizen participation and will at the same time address the challenges exacerbated by the pandemic. There are three such foundational principles:

- Transparency
- Accountability
- Citizen responsibility

Transparency - citizen participation in the governance will not be effective if the entire policy-making and governance process is not transparent. Two major instruments guide the policy planning process in local self-government bodies: long-term plan (social-economic development and sectoral development plans), mid-term plan (policy priorities list) and short-term plan (municipality budget). It is vital to create

so-called user-friendly versions of these foundational documents, locate them in the online space accessible to the public and make each change in a participatory and transparent manner. Naturally, the process should consider citizens' technological, political literacy level, and computer skills.

Moreover, any administrative process, excluding matters of private, commercial or state secret service, should become public and transparent:

- Municipal procurements;
- Administrative and representation expenditures;
- Issuing permissions and licenses;
- Public administrative proceedings and etc.

Transparent processes and accessible governance bodies create trust towards the government which is a decisive factor in citizen participation.

Accountability - Besides transparency and accessibility, citizens' trust in the government is also deepened with a government's accountability. Municipality mayor and Sakrebulo members are primary authorities on the local level responsible for policy planning and administration through citizen participation. Citizen communication issues prevailed even before the pandemic and let alone the times of pandemic. Local municipalities are key government entities in Georgia. For instance, a mayor serves around 55 000 citizens, while a Sakrebulo member has to serve about 2000 citizens' interests. Such huge responsibilities are challenging to fulfill even with the high-level administrative support a mayor's office enjoys. This challenge has significantly toughened in the time of the pandemic. The proper solution to this problem would lie in the creation of digital communication channels. More specifically, a citizen should be able to make an appointment with a mayor online, without hours-long waiting at the door. Also, a citizen should be able to raise the question with a mayor without visiting them. Similarly, a citizen should be able to submit an appeal online and receive prompt feedback on any issue of local importance. **Easily accessible and accountable mayor or a Sakrebulo member is a trustworthy partner for a citizen in order to encourage their participation in policy-making and administration processes. Trustful partners deserve "friendship."**

Citizen responsibility - Citizen participation is not only a process but also a result for what the participation is valuable. A responsible citizen who can commit to solving the problems of their community, neighborhood, town or city and would not wait until the municipality or the central government addresses the issue, can achieve a lot. Consolidated and a self-organized society is very important. A municipality, the central government or international partners are just an aid and an asset for responsible and self-organized grassroots. Citizens know the best what problems require solutions

and knowing the essence of the problem makes them potentially the most effective problem solvers. Recent developments reveal that very frequently; the solution lies in the launch of electronic communication platforms, such as:

- Electronic petition;
- Software programs that are adjusted to smartphone operation systems and integrate surveys on budget priorities, policy programs and events;
- Digital platforms for neighborhood/community assembly.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The government bears the responsibility to ensure that pandemic doesn't completely undermine existing weak connections between citizens and the government, especially local government. The pandemic has already raised the concern that the local government might lose its key feature, proximity to public and governance through active public participation. In order to ensure that this risk is mitigated, the central government should:

Provide legal, financial, technical consultation to support the creation of easily accessible digital communication channels and platforms for citizens. Contemporary communication tools and platforms enable citizen participation in either the service delivery and or the local governance processes;

Ensure the decentralized system of training and tutoring for the public servants of the local government bodies so that they better address either pandemic-related challenges or the governance issues exacerbated by the pandemic;

Speed up the implementation of the State 'Internetization' Program;

In the longer-term, support the decentralization process, including the delegation of additional responsibilities to local government bodies, creating a financial-economic base for municipalities and institutionalizing good governance principles on local levels because the local-self-government is the central government's important and valuable partner in addressing global and nationwide challenges.

Create a rewarding system where a municipality's innovative approaches to boost citizen participation will be funded by the Municipal Development Fund and supported with other relevant resources from the central government.

In the time of pandemic and in the post-pandemic period, local self-government bodies should:

Become more transparent and publicize all essential documents (such as policy priorities, budget, social-economic and sectoral development plans and etc.) since its drafting stage to the adoption and encourage citizen engagement;

Distance communication channels with citizens should be created considering the needs, existing material-technical capacity and citizens' awareness/skills to utilize them. Such communication channels should include hotline phone call service, interactive webpages, social media communication, electronic petition, electronic survey, etc.

Actively practice the forms of citizen engagement mandated by the law and create new, innovative methods of citizen participation, considering international practice.

As multiple times noted earlier, public participation in the governance process has been very weak even before the pandemic. Regrettably, the Covid-19 has indefinitely exacerbated the issue. Besides pandemic, there are few more impeding factors too:

- Large municipalities;
- Inconvenient geographical and meteorological factors;
- Unsophisticated transport and road infrastructure;
- Low level of access to the internet.

Institutionalization of digital models for citizen participation will address not only pandemic-imposed challenges but will also tackle other impeding factors that keep citizens distanced from the local governance processes. Transparency, accountability and responsible citizenship will loosen up the pandemic-imposed pressure and will make governance more democratic and participatory.

